

A DIPLOMAT RESIGNS OVER AFGHANISTAN

JANUARY 2010

IN THESE TIMES

Death by
privatization

Olbermann's
worst **obsession**



the **L** words

Leftists, Liberals —and Losers?

How and why progressives
must unite for real change

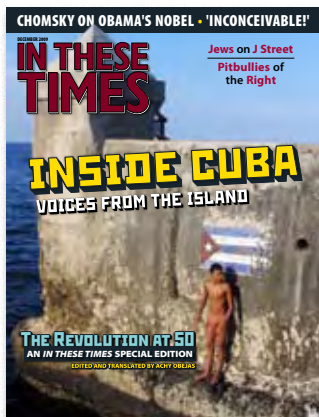
BY G. WILLIAM DOMHOFF

PLUS

Richard Flacks and David Sirota:
dueling views on Obama's first year

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letters



Queer offense

I object to your use of the phrase “queer community” in the December 2009 issue (“Gay Life in Cuba”), where you state: “After a 50-year wait, the Cuban queer community finally celebrated Mr. Gay Havana.” I don’t feel that any group of people should be referred to a “queer,” as that is a terribly offensive term. I would like to cancel my subscription to *In These Times*.

Robert Runkel
Monterey, Calif.

ACHY OBEJAS, EDITOR OF THE DECEMBER ISSUE'S SPECIAL CUBA SECTION, RESPONDS:

We worked very hard on this special issue and took great pains to get things just right—that particular blog selection was something I personally went over with the young men in Havana who wrote it. They both felt it was the right word, the appropriate word, to convey all of the many “communities” in Havana’s gay world.

In recent years, the word

“queer” has become a word of great pride, rather than an insult. It not only signals not straight, but also marginality, of being outlawed, out of bounds. As a gay person myself, I assure you that I would never have allowed an insult or perjorative to be used.

I certainly hope you’ll reconsider your cancellation.

Overwhelmed by the world

You want to know why there isn’t a mass student movement (“Empathy, Not Apathy,” December 2009)? Because poverty, war, corruption, neoliberalism, capitalism, hunger, prison, torture, slavery, global warming and racism have left some of your dutiful students a little overwhelmed. Some may attempt to join an organization, but even these folks walk around with the crippling knowledge that their involvement is not enough.

We all must look deep into the heart of our culture, and our society, if we do indeed wish to see the disease that is eating away at our integrity. And then we all may together figure out how to change.

Claire Williams
InTheseTimes.com

Dubious technology claims

I find many of Karla Jay’s comments about students’ use of technology dubious (“Empathy, Not Apathy,” December 2009).

1. Online news outlets might very well prove superior to the newspapers you want students to read. Remember when bloggers kept alive the story of Trent Lott’s racist comments when mainstream media let the issue pass?
2. It doesn’t follow that because something is short it is necessarily shallow or superficial. The sonnet is short and deep. Twitter

can be too.

3. Texting has enabled mass resistance and organization, e.g., “smart mobs.”
4. Your contention that “life online has turned you away from the world around you” is grounded in a false opposition between life online and life in the “world.” Life online is part of the world.

Matt Williams
InTheseTimes.com

INTHESETIMES.COM

On the 40th anniversary of *Slaughterhouse Five*’s publication, we offer an appreciation of Kurt Vonnegut’s classic novel. Gregory Sumner argues that the book contains an enduring humanism—even patriotism—that transcends the 1960s.

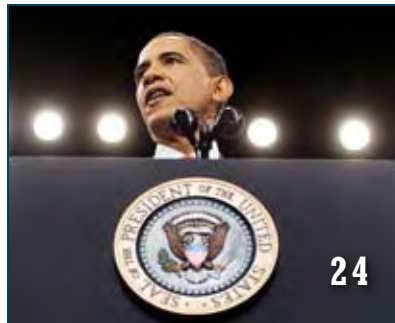
In a special web-only feature story, activist and author Bill Fletcher, Jr. and renowned historian Nelson Lichtenstein offer a sharp analysis of a growing crisis in organized labor: the “civil war” raging within the Service Employees International Union, which in early 2009 placed one its large locals into “trusteeship.” “Social justice unionism” is needed now more than ever, Fletcher and Lichtenstein argue, to revive a struggling labor movement.

In a 20 Questions interview, we talk with Amy Dean, author of *A New New Deal: How Regional Activism Will Reshape the American Labor*, about the future of America’s unions.

And coverage of Honduras’ political crisis continues at *InTheseTimes.com*, as a growing grassroots movement challenges the legitimacy of the presidential election held by de facto military rulers. Visit *InTheseTimes.com* for regular dispatches from Honduras by Jeremy Kryt.

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BY ROGER MORRIS AND GEORGE KENNEY

Obama's 'Ben Tre Logic'

HAS NOTHING CHANGED since we were preparing to invade Iraq eight years ago?

Yes, we have a new president, one who is smart and speaks in complete sentences. Yet we are about to jump pell-mell into escalating another war. With the surge of 30,000 American soldiers set to begin in January, President Barack Obama's total Afghan War escalation now stands at 51,000.

And what for? Why pour more troops into Afghanistan, the graveyard of empires? To defeat al Qaeda—in Pakistan? To protect and nurture an Afghan government with little local legitimacy? To protect an Afghan population from foreign fighters through an occupation by foreign soldiers? Apparently, the answer is all of the above.

But, most absurdly, the *New York Times* lead editorial on December 2 lauded the president for explaining that the the United States needs to send more troops to Afghanistan “so American troops can eventually go home.”

We have heard such reasoning before. It is called “Ben Tre logic,” as in the Vietnamese provincial capital Ben Tre. On Feb. 7, 1968, the Associated Press’ Peter Arnett famously reported that an unnamed Air Force Major informed him, “It became necessary to destroy the town to save it.”

Does any of it make sense?

The invasion of Afghanistan began in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, when critical analysis of foreign policy was stifled. Since 2003, it became rhetorically useful for many critics of the Iraq War to cover their right flank by identifying Afghanistan as the “good war.” Consequently, the merits of the war in Afghanistan have never been freely and fully debated in the press.

Fairness and Accuracy in Report-

ing (FAIR), the media watch group, examined all of the opinion columns discussing what the United States should do in Afghanistan that appeared in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* during the first 10 months of 2009. Of the 67 columns that were published in the *Washington Post*, 61 supported a continued war and six expressed anti-war views. Of the 43 columns published in the *New York Times*, 36 supported the war and seven opposed it—and five of those opposing it were by *Times* columnist Bob Herbert.

The real debate that occurred on the op-ed pages of these two newspapers was over whether to escalate or pursue an alternate war strategy. The *Times*: 14 escalate, 22 different strategy. The *Post*: 31 escalate, 30 different strategy.

FAIR’s Steve Rendall writes, “*The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* continue to wield an unmatched influence in the nation’s capital and in newsrooms across the country. One can only imagine what public opinion would be, and what policy might result, if these papers truly offered a wide-ranging debate on the Afghanistan War.”

On the back page of this issue of *In These Times*, Roger Morris and George Kenney, two former Foreign Service Officers who resigned on principle from the State Department during two previous U.S. wars (Cambodia and the Balkans, respectively), write about diplomat Matthew Hoh, the former Marine Captain in Iraq who resigned his State Department post in Afghanistan over how that war is being waged.

Where on the op-ed pages of the papers of record are voices like those of Kenney, Morris and Hoh?

At the cost of life and limb, the mainstream press has—as it did with the Iraq war—failed us, again.

—Joel Bleifuss

IN THESE TIMES

“With liberty and justice for all...”

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We encourage letters to the editor, and reserve the right to edit them for clarity, grammar and length. Send them to: 2040 North Milwaukee Avenue, Chicago, IL 60647. Or submit them electronically at: www.inthesetimes.com/site/about/contact. Please include your full name and address.

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For more information call Joel Bleifuss at 773-772-0100 x232 or e-mail Joel at: joel@inthesetimes.com.

mixed reaction

JUST THE FACTS



46 percent of Americans who think the Democratic Party's views are "too liberal"

8 percent of Americans who think the Democratic Party's views are "too conservative"

21 percent of Americans who identify as "liberal"

15 percent of Americans who think the news media is "too conservative"



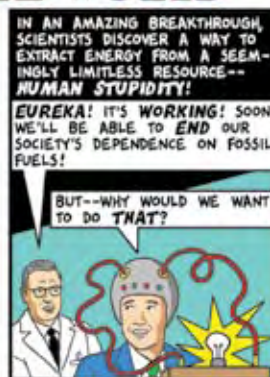
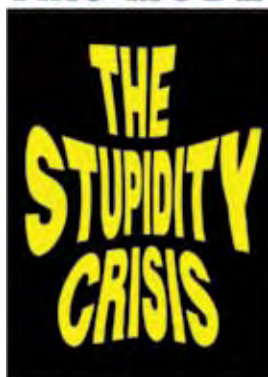
Democracy is not something that happens, you know, just at election time, and it's not something that happens just with one event. It's an ongoing building process. But it also ought to be a part of our culture, a part of our lives.



—JIM HIGHTOWER, RECIPIENT OF THE 2009 PUFFIN/NATION PRIZE FOR CREATIVE CITIZENSHIP

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



QUID PRO QUO

THE QUID:

Staunch opponent of the healthcare public option Rep. Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) promotes himself as a "fiscal hawk" as he sides with the GOP. He promises to oppose any bill that includes a public option, even if it includes a clause allowing states to opt out. He says he doesn't want to burden taxpayers with a government-funded health insurance plan that would stop economic growth before it begins.

THE QUO:

But could it be that Lieberman is really protecting the health insurance industry? Over the past 10 years, Lieberman has received \$448,066 in campaign donations from health insurance corporations—and \$65,200 of that came in the past year from Aetna, headquartered at 151 Framington Ave. in Hartford, Conn. It's safe to assume that there's more gold awaiting Lieberman should he continue



serving that special client. Now that we have established that Joe's a ho, all that is left to know is his final price.



Chicago has long been an important center for both manufacturing and shipping goods.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ILE LOCAL 110

The Shipping Point

Between China and big box stores, minimum wage 'temp' workers take a stand

BY ROGER BYBEE

THE CHICAGO AREA HAS long been one of the nation's most important manufacturing centers.

But now that the City of Big Shoulders has been stripped of much of its industrial base, state and local officials—along with corporate developers—hope to capitalize on its evermore important role as a transportation hub in the global supply chain.

Chicago is a critical juncture for distribution of goods throughout the nation, and by locating just outside the city, the “goods movement industry” can shave two days off of distribution time by avoiding the congestion that plagues the city's railways according to Mark Meinster, international representative for the United Electrical Workers of America (UE).

More than ever, corporations need a complex distribution network to get the goods they produce in Mexico and China to market. Stepping into this role have been intermodal transportation complexes like the gigantic Centerpoint hub built in 2002 in Elwood, Ill., 75 minutes south of Chicago. Meinster said that the warehouses employ about 1,500 to 2,000 workers at warehouses owned by dozens of major firms, and helps make Chicago the third largest container port after Hong Kong and Singapore, and the largest intermodal facility in the U.S.

The company has received \$160 million in state and local subsidies from public officials desperate to find a substitute for the loss of high-paying manufacturing jobs. And Centerpoint claims that, when at full

capacity, the hub in Elwood will have cost \$1 billion total and will provide 8,000 jobs in the area.

However, the public subsidies have failed to produce a harvest of quality jobs at Centerpoint, as well as three other Chicago-area hubs already built or under construction. Most of the warehouse work is done by temporary workers paid minimum-wage, which is currently \$8 per hour in Illinois.

The lack of public awareness about the warehouse workers' plight began to change when 70 workers were fired at a warehouse owned by Michigan-based Bissell Corp.—best known for its vacuum cleaners, now all produced overseas—and managed by Danish logistics firm Maersk. The Maersk/Bissell workers' mistake: seeking help from the UE, the union behind the Republic Windows and Doors sit-down strike one year ago.

The firings were precipitated by an Oct. 29 letter signed by the workers calling for an end to unfair practices and demanding union recognition by the UE. The workers drove home their message by wearing stickers that read, simply, “Justice.” Along with wanting a union to represent them, the workers sought policy changes including addressing underpayment of wages, and management's harassment of a pregnant woman by refusing to respect her doctor-mandated work restrictions.

On November 5, Roadlink, the temporary agency that employed the workers for Maersk/Bissell, told the workers that they would be fired in three stages between that date and January 9, with the last contingent of workers expected to train their replacements.

Following a November 12 picket and rally at the Maersk/Bissell warehouse, the workers and UE successfully pressured Roadlink to agree to pay all workers through January 9.

The workers and the UE have continued to resist the firings by taking the workers' case to the National Labor Relations Board, asserting that they are clearly being fired for concerted activity that is protected under the law. “The workers aren't taking this,

and are demanding that they stay on,” says UE field organizer Leah Fried. “They want to be made whole, and want the ability to blow the whistle on illegal things, and the assurance that they will be respected and the law will be followed.”

The Maersk/Bissell/Roadlink team is employing a comically circular argument to resist a union representation election. “Management is saying that there is no union election because there’s no bargaining unit,” says Fried. “And why isn’t there any bargaining unit? Because they fired them all!”

The struggle at the Maersk/Bissell warehouse is significant because it involves the shaping of a vital sector of the emerging U.S. economy “This is the new economy replacing manufacturing because things aren’t being made here, but instead are being shipped here,” Fried says. “These are potentially good jobs, but they have been converted to ‘perma-temp’ jobs (workers working indefinitely for temporary agencies at the same job without any hope of being hired permanently by the actual company) at the minimum wage, with no prospect of a raise. This is the dark underbelly of how products get to our stores.”

There is constant pressure from big-box retailers like Wal-Mart and Target to hold down wages and benefits to workers all along the supply chain—from the stores to the distribution centers to the manufacturing sites at low-wage plants in China (some 60 percent of China’s exports are shipped by foreign firms, writes Jeff Faux in *The Global Class War*). “It’s fascinating to see how standards are driven by big-box retailers that make sure that companies pay as little as possible,” says Fried.

As at Centerpoint and other transportation hubs, warehouse owners utilize a number of management layers to insulate themselves from legal accountability and to thwart the possibility of union organizing. The pattern plays out at the massive Inland Empire hub in San Bernardino, Calif., which employs 118,000 workers, points out R.M. Arrieta, a regular contributor to *Working In These Times*, this magazine’s workers’ rights blog.

For years, the warehouses there offered relatively decent pay, but then

saw potential for driving down wages through the use of temporary agencies. “When these companies hire workers through a third party, they can skirt responsibilities that were once a staple for many U.S. workers: healthcare, paid sick days and vacation pay, and the assurance that workers wouldn’t be fired on a whim,” Arrieta reports. “Hiring out through a third party also squelches organizing efforts. Temp workers often work side-by-side with permanent, direct-hire employees, creating a divided ‘two-tier’ workforce that fails to find a common cause.”

“Workers in this industry have a tremendous amount of power,” says UE’s Mark Meinster. “And now they’re doing things together to stop these abuses.” ■

Independence and ‘Catastrophe’?

IN A COUNTRY rooted in the Zionist narrative of how Israel was created, the organization Zochrot (Hebrew for “remembering”) says to its adversaries what the black nurse in *Angels in America* says to the dying Roy Cohn: “I am your negation.”

Founded in 2002 by activists, mostly Israeli Jews but a few from Palestinian political party Fatah, Zochrot is rooted in memory: the memory of the “Nakba,” Arabic for ‘catastrophe’, and how Palestinians refer to the creation of Israel on their land.

Zochrot tries to democratize memory. Each year on Israeli Independence Day, it holds its Nakba Day rally in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, where a monument to the Holocaust stands. In that square in 2005, it unveiled its Nakba Map, which restores the locations of Palestinian villages destroyed during the ‘47 War of Independence and afterwards.

“The Jews in Israel,” says Eitan Bronstein, the director of Zochrot, “know almost nothing about the Nakba.” That must change, he says, if “our responsibility for taking part in the Nakba” is to be understood. “In school, when we studied Israel’s War of Independence, we learned



On May 18, young Palestinian men sit in front of a poster marking the 61st anniversary of Nakba. The poster hangs on the wall that divides the West Bank village of Azariya, near Bethlehem.

about Operation Gideon and Operation Danny, which conquered Ramle, but we never learned about who were expelled because of these operations.” Bronstein estimates that 750,000 Palestinians were forced from their homes, and 500 villages and neighborhoods were destroyed.

Zochrot members regularly take groups of Israelis and Palestinians on tours of these villages and neighborhoods, sometimes accompanied by the Palestinians who once lived there. Tour participants are told of the lives and fate of the vanished inhabitants.

Zochrot is known for putting up in signs at the sites of the wiped-out villages with their original Arabic names. “The signs are usually removed after 15 minutes,” says Norma Musih, one of Zochrot’s founders. “At most, two hours.”

Early in 2004, Zochrot activists were prevented from resurrecting the names of the villages of Yalu and Imwas in Cana Park, a suburb north of Jerusalem. Zochrot took the town to court and in March 2006, the court ruled in its favor. A commemorative sign was posted that read in part: “The villages, Imwas and Yalu, existed in the area of the park until 1967. In the village of Imwas there lived 2,000 residents who now reside in and around Ramallah.”

Musih was both outraged and amused. “Nothing is written about what happened to the residents. It’s as if they just decided one day to move to Ramallah.”

Most Israelis hold Zochrot in contempt for its identification with Nakba. This is especially true of older Israelis who cling to the traditional narrative of how the Jewish state was created. The younger generation, says Bronstein, is more cynical and open to hearing out heretical challenges to cherished beliefs.

While Dan Flesher, of the Israeli-Palestinian blog, Realistic Dove, stresses the importance for the Palestinian side of having their narrative presented unedited to Israelis, he questions Zochrot's interpretation: "I am not sure it is entirely accurate. Each side has its own version. Each side committed atrocities, and were guilty of injustices. The narrative is not a simple one."

This past Nakba Day, *Yediot Aharonot*, Israel's largest newspaper, ran an op-ed piece by a Zochrot member explaining why she doesn't celebrate Israeli Independence Day. Much of the response to the piece was nasty, said Musih. "People wrote: 'You are traitors. You should be jailed.' But we did actually get some very

nice letters sent to our website."

Bronstein was pleased with *Yediot*, but he remains fundamentally at odds with the Israeli press. "They get things twisted. They say we have the Palestinian narrative about the Nakba. It's *our* narrative."

The Knesset is currently considering a weak version of an anti-Nakba Day Law, first proposed last spring by MK Alex Miller of the right-wing Israel Beiteinu Party. Miller called for the criminalization of any observance of Nakba Day. Violators of the law would have faced up to three years imprisonment. The amended law, expected to pass shortly, would result in the denial of government funding for legislators in Israeli Arab towns that organize Nakba Day rallies. Zochrot responded with a statement, saying the legislation reflects the Israeli establishment fears "the inevitable encounter with the Palestinian Nakba, and the understanding that the Nakba is a foundational part of the Israeli identity."

—Robert Hirschfield

Free Speech, for Art's Sake

CHICAGO, IL.—ON NOVEMBER 13, the hordes of holiday season shoppers encountered a sight rarely seen in downtown Chicago: an artist selling art on the sidewalk. Near the entrance to Macy's at the corner of Randolph and State Streets, artist and activist Chris Drew displayed an array of \$1 patches and a prominent "Art for Sale" sign affixed to his bright red poncho. His conspicuous appearance attracted several customers over the course of his two-and-a-half-hour vigil, but most of the attention he received was of a less positive nature. Four police officers stopped to tell him that what he was doing was illegal. One wrote him a ticket.

Today, however, this attention was welcome. Drew knows it's illegal to sell art in most of downtown Chicago and other prohibited districts. As the leader of the Free Speech Artists' Movement

DEAR ITT IDEOLOGIST

Dear ITT Ideologist,

Naturally, our plan at *Law and Order* for the forthcoming 9/11 Manhattan terror trial is to rip it from the headlines, melodramatize it, ballyhoo its network premier, and then rerun it on TNT for the next three centuries. We've got the prosecution part down, but are having trouble dreaming up a doable defense. I am therefore asking you to act as *amicus curiae* in the case.

D. Wolf, *New York*

Dear Mr. Wolf,

I am happy to be of counsel. Coincidentally, I mastered *corpus juris* by watching 323 episodes of *Law and Order* after inadvertently subscribing to a cable operator that carries only TNT.

I emphasize that I am offering the following argument *advocatus diaboli* rather than out of personal conviction.

I suggest a Blackwater-Bush defense. Defense counsel should argue *a fortiori* that the accused were privately contracted to attack U.S. command and control targets for remuneration (*vis Army Air Corps v. Milo Minderbinder*). Those

actions were taken in accord with the Bush doctrine, which holds that a country may attack any other country that it surmises might do it harm at some future time (*vis Bush v. Iraq*). The contractor claim of sovereignty for the purpose of invoking the Bush Doctrine is as *per stirpes* inheritor of the caliphate (*vis Mohammed v. Infidels*). This is so, whether or not the governor of Alaska was aware of it (*vis Gibson v. Palin*).

Further, defendants should hold that both the Pentagon and World Trade Center qualify as command and control facilities under prevailing U.S. military doctrine. Civilian casualties resulting from these attacks would therefore be considered collateral damage. "Such damage is not unlawful so long as it is not excessive in light of the overall military advantage anticipated from the attack" (USDOD Joint Publication 3-60). Since contractor anticipated that God's wrath would guide its thunderbolts in achieving the greatest



of earthly victories, collateral damage level was acceptable.

Finally, I recommend that you engage Denny Crane from ABC's *Boston Legal* as first defense chair. The twinkle in his eye and his colorful cravats would be a plus in humanizing the defendants.

Should you have further questions, do not hesitate to contact me at the Professor Irwin Corey Institute for Inchoate Studies at Hudson University.

Dear ITT Ideologist,

I've been hearing a lot about angry atheists lately. Is this something I should get riled about?

M. Huckabee, *Little Rock*

Dear Governor Huckabee,

Not to worry. Angry atheism, or being mad at something that isn't there, is a harmless form of moper, such as exposing one's self to a blind person.

—Pete Karman

ONLINE FIGHT AGAINST HUNGER

For the first time in history, the number of hungry people in the world will exceed 1 billion, according to the UN's World Food Programme (WFP).

Nearly 50 million people in the United States alone—including one in four American children—had difficulty getting enough food at some point in the past year, according to a November 16 USDA report.

With these statistics, the pressure is on for government agencies to address the issue of hunger. And at a time when public funds are lacking, some organizations, like the WFP, are seeking to mobilize the general public.

In the wake of the World Food Summit held in Rome in November, the WFP has launched the first global citizens' campaign against hunger. The "Billion for a Billion" online campaign calls on a billion global citizens who have enough food to eat to help the billion people who don't by donating online and spreading awareness (via Facebook, Twitter, and blogs about hunger). The campaign combines a person's willingness to help with the technological capability to do so.

If a billion Internet users could donate \$1 or one Euro a week, it could go a long way—just \$5 can provide supplementary food to a baby for one year and \$170 can feed an adult for one year, says the WFP.

To learn more or to get involved, visit <http://www.wfp.org/1billion>.

—Gemma Baltazar



group, he chose to violate this law and incur a fine because he intends to sue the city for violating his First Amendment rights.

"During the Iraq War, when I went out to try to sell my patches on the street, I discovered why it's so hard for artists to survive in Chicago," Drew says. "I got a peddler's license, then a speech permit for certain corners of the Loop. It has three pages of prohibited districts—every place you could make a living."

Drew maintains that the city of Chicago infringes on artists' speech rights in multiple ways. According to the rules of the speech permit, "every month you have to show them all the art you're going to sell in the next month, so the bureaucratic structure doesn't allow any topical speech. Everything is censored by prior restraint. You're limited to a small audience because you're nailed to only that corner. And the license itself is a violation, because you shouldn't need to license speech."

The ACLU of Illinois also finds fault with Chicago's peddling restraints. According to Senior Staff Counsel Adam Schwartz, "Speech peddling is clearly within the domain of First Amendment given protections. Our concern is that Chicago has created large blackout zones for expressive peddling in the city." As for the \$165 fee for a two-year peddler license, Schwartz says, "we think that's excessive."

In 1997, a marijuana legalization advocate named Wendy Ayres successfully sued the city for her right to sell T-shirts at city-sponsored park festivals. The Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in *Ayres v. City of Chicago* that "Harm anticipated by city...in terms of increased congestion and loss of revenue from authorized T-shirt seller, was trivial, while harm to organization resulting from denial was great, in that festivals presented enormous potential audience for its message."

Drew hopes that the courts will be similarly sympathetic to his case. "The homeless have won their speech rights," he says, referring to the 1983 case *Thompson v. City of Chicago*, which ended with the city settling and repealing its anti-panhandling law. "A homeless artist can beg a dollar from you legally, but if he



PHOTO COURTESY OF RON GRENKO

Back-up needed: the Art-for-Sale Man is a big problem on Chicago's sidewalks.

draws your portrait on a paper plate he cannot legally sell it to you."

In the Ayres case, and in justifying its current ban on street food vendors, the city and aldermen have argued that vendors worsen congestion on busy sidewalks. Drew dismisses this claim, pointing out that selling art is no worse than handing out fliers. "They [the city] are meeting less compelling needs," he says. "They don't want us to compete with brick-and-mortar businesses. And politicians like the idea of preventing artists from having free expression, because it's less pressure on them."

Contrary to the city's fears of competition, Drew believes street artists could strengthen the local economy. "When artists have freedom, the whole city prospers," he says. But when artists abdicate their rights—as he thinks they have done in Chicago—the consequences are widespread. "As artists, we polish our speech. If you make it illegal for us to speak, you've cut out the most important speech—you've censored society."

Drew will go to court for his fine on December 17, where he plans to plead guilty. After that he expects it to take another three to six months before the appellate courts hears his case. "It's taken us three years to sue," he says. "We've been building support all this time. And once this case is over, we won't be anywhere close to done."

—Robin Peterson

No Change for Obama

ONE YEAR AGO, many members of the LGBT community, their families and friends were overjoyed at Barack Obama's election. Today members of that same community find their fervor has faded.

On November 9, AMERICAblog editors John Aravosis and Joe Sudbay launched a boycott of Obama and the Democratic Party. Those who sign their online petition take a pledge to withhold all donations to the Democratic National Committee and Organizing for America until the Employment Non-Discrimination Act is passed, and both Don't Ask, Don't Tell and the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) are repealed—all actions that Obama promised to fulfill as president. During the 2008 primaries, AMERICAblog was an early supporter of Obama, raising nearly \$50,000 for him as a candidate.

AMERICAblog outlines concrete examples of the president not being the "fierce advocate" for the civil rights of gay and lesbian Americans that he had promised to be. While an optimistic speech to the Human Rights Campaign and the signing into law of the Hate Crime Bill on October 28, were steps forward, Obama failed to oppose anti-gay legislation in both Maine and Washington state.

"I think at this point it's become fairly clear to most everyone that the president and the Democrats overall get a rather serious case of gay panic whenever it comes time to act on any given gay issue," Aravosis told *In These Times*. "We kept hearing from more and more readers, and friends, both gay and straight, who asked why any of us should be giving another dime to Democrats, with the way they've been treating us."

While some critics may preach the importance of remaining patient, Aravosis cites the DOMA scandal that occurred in June—when both the White House and the Department of Justice upheld the definition of marriage as a legal union between a man and a woman—to highlight the importance of taking action. "If we pressure the president to keep his prom-

snapshot



KABUL, AFGHANISTAN—An Afghan man visits the animal market ahead of the feast of Eid al-Adha on November 26, in Kabul, Afghanistan. The festival of sacrifice is celebrated throughout the Muslim world as a commemoration of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son for God. The festival falls at the end of the pilgrimage season to Mecca, on the tenth day of Zulhijjah, the final month of the Muslim calendar. (Photo by Majid Saeedi/Getty Images)

ises, we lose nothing. If we wait to see if he really is going to keep his promises, and he doesn't, it will be too late to do a damn thing about it," Aravosis says.

Aravosis says that when DNC Treasurer Andy Tobias posted comments on the blog expressing his discontent with the campaign, it was "a surefire sign that we got the DNC's attention."

In its statement on the issue, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) says, "Individual donors should always make their own careful assessments of how to spend limited political contributions. We all need to focus on the legislative priorities identified by AMERICAblog and with whatever tactic individuals decide to employ, the ultimate objective needs to be securing the votes we need to move our legislative agenda forward."

Aravosis thinks HRC did a good job of

avoiding criticism of the effort, and even somewhat reinforcing the campaign's message. "At some point, HRC needs to realize that they're in the driver's seat," Aravosis says. "The administration needs HRC far more than HRC needs the administration."

To date, almost 6,000 people have signed the petition.

"Damn right we think it's the most effective political strategy we could have employed. Carrots alone get you nowhere in Washington. Sometimes you need a good stick too."

—Gemma Baltazar

GET INVOLVED

To find out more about "Take the Pledge, Don't Ask, Don't Give," visit www.americablog.com.

BY SUSAN J. DOUGLAS

The Worst Obsession in the World



GLENN BECK IS the anti-Christ. Sarah Palin is an idiot; yet she is also more dangerous than Hitler, or even George W.

Bush. Bill O'Reilly is, day in and day out, the "worst person in the world."

Welcome to *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*, one of the few liberal precincts on television. The show became a refuge for many during the Bush years, especially

when Olbermann delivered his passionate on-air editorials about the Bush administration's serial violation of the Constitution and morality on so many fronts. But has the show lost its way? And is Olbermann's obsession with "Bill-O the clown," Beck, Limbaugh and Palin a necessary and important monitoring of what's going on in the right-wing media? Or is it an echo-chamber that inflates its importance and influence beyond Fox News' 1.5 to 2 million viewers?

To its credit, *Countdown* typically offers much more detailed coverage and commentary on the healthcare debate in Congress, and other pressing issues, than one can get on the network news or CNN. And the show has publicized and helped support the opening of temporary free clinics in places like Arkansas so people who haven't seen a doctor in years can get checkups and medical attention.

But the show's relentless, strident and snarky attacks on Fox et al. are becoming tiresome. Each show is incessantly punctuated with multiple teasers before each commercial break for upcoming stories "only on *Countdown*" about the latest "madness" of Glenn Beck and the "lies" of Sarah Palin. And so we get a detailed account of Beck musing that because the façade of Rockefeller Center contains a sickle and a weed, the building houses subliminal symbols for either Communism or Fascism. There was an endless segment in the wake of Sarah Palin's interview with Oprah, in which Olbermann fact-checked nearly everything Palin said on *Oprah* and provided file footage of her in the past saying the exact opposite. Do we care whether Palin said, in 2008, that her family voted in favor of her running for vicepresident but on *Oprah* in 2009 she said they didn't?

The following night, guest host Lawrence O'Donnell speculated repeatedly that Glenn Beck could be Palin's running

mate should she run in 2012 because she had said something complimentary about him in an interview. Of course, the prospect of a Palin-Beck ticket is red meat to the *Countdown* audience, but it is sheer conjecture—and ridiculous.

Whether Palin's utterances are factual or Beck is crazy are moot points. Rather than make fun of them, which is not hard to do, progressives should try to understand their appeal. Palin has tapped into and speaks for a group of white, mostly small-town and rural Americans who feel aggrieved by elite America. But she also combines an emphatic femininity—the peep toe shoes, flowing hair, beauty contestant looks—with a buoyant defiance that adds an element of macho gutsiness to her performance.

Beck, while often hyper-emotional and prone to the preposterous, has taken that hoary teaching tool from yesteryear, the blackboard, to address his viewers as if they were part of an Elderhostel, eager to receive real facts. This has been a hugely successful ploy.

Palin, Beck, et al. are thus fascinating, infuriating and scary. But the number of their true believers remains small in the national scheme of things. For *Countdown* to devote so much valuable broadcasting real estate, not to mention emotional angst, to these far-right demagogues exaggerates their importance and makes them seem to represent many more Americans than they do. People may be flocking to Palin book signings in droves in targeted towns in the Midwest, but is it because they intend to vote for her or because she's a charismatic celebrity? A recent ABC/*Washington Post* poll shows only 20 percent of Americans identifying themselves as Republicans; a CBS poll shows that only 23 percent have a favorable view of Palin; the ABC/*Post* poll found that 60 percent said she is not qualified to be president, and only 28 percent of those polled by CNN believe she is.

So, Dear Mr. Olbermann: Can you stop providing a megaphone for these turkeys? Beck and Palin have been successful in part because they have created an imagined community of followers whom they make feel much more powerful than they actually are. Might you, by shifting your coverage to less famous, unsung progressives and liberals around the country fighting for financial reform, climate-change legislation and the like, help make us feel as potent a force as we actually are? I, for one, would like to see more of the energy, ideas and actions on the left. ■

Whether Palin's utterances are factual or Beck is crazy are moot points. Rather than make fun of them, we should try to understand their appeal.

Death by Privatization

For-profit prison healthcare system implicated in death of inmate

BY TERRY J. ALLEN

ASHLEY ELLIS'S MISDEMEANOR ARREST turned into a death sentence. Her crime: "careless and negligent operation of a motor vehicle." Less than two days after entering a Vermont prison on a 30-day sentence, she died from the careless and negligent operation of a privatized for-profit prison healthcare system.

Her death shows what can, and does, happen across the country when states outsource prisoner medical services: states cut corners on monitoring, and contractors skimp on care.

Ellis' death "is a pretty blatant and obvious and extreme case of gross negligence," says Seth Lipschutz, supervising attorney at the Vermont Defenders office. "We figured out in a day that they killed her."

Accidents happen

There are cracks in everyone's path that can widen into disaster. Ellis seemed to trip into more than her share. The car accident for which she was jailed was just that—an accident. She was not speeding or impaired when she hit a man on a motorcycle. He suffered terrible injuries, was put on a ventilator, and is in a wheelchair.

Her injuries emerged over time. "Ashley was horrified by what she had done," said Sandra Gipe, her grandmother. In the two years between the accident and her incarceration, Ellis became a licensed nursing aide, and "took care of people on ventilators," said her public defender Mary Kay Lanthier. "That was all she knew to do, since she couldn't help the man she hit."

She also dropped almost 40 pounds, and her eating disorder became so severe she had been hospitalized. When she entered prison, she required regular potassium supplements to keep her



Ashley Ellis in early 2008, about six months after the car accident for which she was jailed.

heart from shutting down. Prison Health Services (PHS) never gave her the prescribed medication that could have saved her life. An autopsy put the cause of death as heart failure caused by "denial of access to medication."

Ellis stood 5 foot 6 inches and weighed 87 pounds on Friday, August 14, when Gipe drove her to the Northwest State Correctional Facility in Swanton, Vt. A few days earlier, a news report on her sentencing described the 23-year-old as "gaunt and haggard." Her public defender asked for no jail time because traffic accidents aren't crimes, and Ellis was too sick. Judge Thomas Zonay, either ignoring or ignorant of the bare-bones medical staffing on weekends, ordered Ellis to report at the start of the weekend to the 160-bed red brick prison. Zonay declined comment.

From the moment Ellis entered the

bleak intake room with its two barred cells, her life was in the hands of PHS, the fourth for-profit prison healthcare contractor since 1996 to serve Vermont inmates. The Tennessee-based company's cross-country rap sheet is spattered with deaths, lawsuits, millions of dollars in fines and settlements, and numerous investigations. A 2005 three-part *New York Times* investigation found PHS care "flawed and sometimes lethal."

'Potassium girl'

PHS and Vermont's Department of Corrections (DOC) have lawyered up, but we know that days in advance of her incarceration, Ellis's doctor faxed prison authorities health records documenting her serious anorexia/bulimia nervosa, her need for frequent meals, and most importantly, potassium.

On Friday afternoon, a licensed prac-

tical nurse (LPN) conducted the prison's medical intake. On Saturday morning, Dr. John Leppman, the only PHS physician on-call that weekend for Vermont's eight facilities, gave LPN Connie Hall an order for folic acid, potassium and Tums. No potassium was in stock, so a nurse left a cell phone message for a colleague to stop for some at the local drug store before reporting for her 6 p.m. shift. That nurse did not check her messages and arrived at the prison just before the Rite Aid closed for the night.

We also know that by contract, nursing on weekends at Northwest is skeletal and assigned to LPNs who may not have the training to know the importance of potassium, and are barred by state nursing regulations from assessing patients.

By Saturday afternoon, Ellis, who knew the physical danger signs, was begging so often and fervently for potassium that her jailers nicknamed her "Potassium Girl."

Taking pity on the emaciated woman, one corrections officer (CO) violated rules to make her a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, according to Darla Lawton, an investigator with the defender general's office. Another CO was outraged that someone copped a 30-day sentence for a misdemeanor. Ellis was "a skeleton," he says, "I

have never seen anyone in that condition."

By 9 p.m., an hour before lockdown, Ellis complained that she felt unwell and went to bed. "Ashley was someone who needed help so much, and no one helped her," Gipe says.

On Sunday at 6:15 a.m., Ellis seemed OK when a CO brought breakfast to her cell, but when he came to collect the tray, Ellis lay crumpled on her bunk. Her eyes were fixed open, her mouth contained unswallowed food.

Up and down Delta Block, locked-in inmates pressed against the small windows in their steel doors, riveted by the unfolding tragedy.

Ellis was pronounced dead at the local hospital.

PHS's public relations firm issued a statement that Ellis "received care that met applicable standards...[and that] PHS did not deny her access to medications." The company refuses to say more, Vermont has refused to file charges, and the DOC has stonewalled some records requests. Ellis' family is considering a civil suit.

For PHS, paying off lawsuits is part of the cost of doing business. "It's in their interest to provide inadequate care and take lumps when sued," Lipschutz says. And when things get really dicey, PHS

simply quits, "thus preserving its marketable claim that it has never been let go for cause," the *New York Times* wrote four years ago. Conveniently for PHS and Vermont, the contract expires in January, and the relationship is ending with a volley of I-quit, don't-bother-to-reapply exchanges.

Vermont's serial contracts with for-profit prison healthcare corporations follow a nationwide pattern: Prisoners get inadequate care, contractors absorb lawsuits, states switch providers, and the conflict between profit-making and good care remains.

As Lipschutz sees it, Ellis' death is "just another example of the maxim: 'We don't care. We don't have to.'"

"We" usually includes the public. "People admitted in newspaper comments," says Vermont's Defender General Matthew Valerio, "that if it had been a sex offender [who died] they 'wouldn't give a damn.'"

But Ellis, a pretty young woman, incarcerated for an accident, drew press, public sympathy, and a search for those responsible.

At first "I pointed the finger directly at [Connie Hall], the nurse on duty," says Valerio, "but realized she was just the last one in line. Now I think PHS is to blame. ... Profit-driven organizations are prone to cut costs. The system failed."

"My analogy is guards at Abu Ghraib," Lanthier says. "Sure the LPNs bear responsibility, but there is a systemic problem."

Vermont first entered that system in the 1990s with EMSA (Emergency Medical Services Associates, later bought by PHS). Next came CHS, and then Correctional Medical Services (CMS), which the state dumped in 2004 after seven in-prison deaths in one year. An investigation found "inadequate staff [that] would lead to significant medical problems and errors in medication administration," and called for "drastic measures to insure contract compliance." PHS arrived in 2005.

Understaffed to death

"Low staffing levels put Ellis in a position of not getting what she needed," Valerio says. "It frequently happens, but usually no one dies."

PHS's \$16.4 million per year contract



Cells in Delta Block where Ashley Ellis was found dying on Sunday, August 16.

TERRY J. ALLEN

allows it to staff Northwest and other facilities on weekends (and many weekday shifts) with no one above the level of LPN. One PHS doctor is on call, by phone, to cover the 1,600 beds and the 7,000-8,000 people who annually transit the state's eight jails. Leppman says he fields 20 to 30 calls a weekend. Nurses can work 12-hour shifts, and one says she was ordered to work 36 hours straight because no one else was available.

PHS's contract allows all but one prison to substitute an LPN "without penalty if an RN is not available."

The substitution is not trivial. Paid less, LPNs are also less trained (typically one year), and it is not clear, says Valerio, "that an LPN would know that it would have been life threatening" to delay potassium. Lorene Gendron, who worked for PHS for two years as an inmate advocate, says that poor support, salaries and working conditions mean high turnover. "They will hire any friggin' warm body because they go through staff so much," she says.

"PHS's reputation is so bad that good people don't want to work with them, or stay," says Martha Israel, an RN who says she quit the women's prison after "PHS hired an LPN to be nurse manager, a position requiring making patient assessments regularly, but I thought that was incredibly unsafe—and illegal." When PHS's contract was up for renewal, she tried to warn the DOC.

Timely treatment was a perennial problem. Dr. Charles Gluck, now retired, said that when he worked for PHS, he was frustrated by common delays in getting meds and X-rays.

One RN risked her career to fill the gap. In 2006 her patient was in pain, but the prescribed Tylenol 3 would not arrive for days. She violated the rules by taking Tylenol 3 a released prisoner had left behind, and giving it to the suffering woman. "I did the wrong thing legally," she said, "but I was trying to do what was right for my patient." PHS fired her.

"When I heard about Ashley's death, and the failure to provide meds," she said, "I thought: 'Here we go again.' They don't have enough staff, so they push people to the ultimate. I'll bet a dollar to a dime that's what happened to the LPN on the

weekend Ellis died."

When Vermont first hired PHS in 2005, the contract mandated an inmate advocate to visit the prisons and field grievances. "I would say, 'Why can't you just give the patient the med they need?'" Gendron asked. "And PHS would say, 'It's too expensive, or not on our formulary.' It was hard to see something so simple to do for someone

"PHS would say, 'It's too expensive, or not on our formulary.' It was hard to see something so simple and not be able to get it done. There was so much pressure not to prescribe," Gendron said.

and not be able to get it done. There was so much pressure not to prescribe."

"The fewer services they provide, the more money they make," Lipschutz says.

People vs. profits

"I'm still reeling," Andrew Pallito, DOC commissioner, says of Ellis's death. "Up until that point, they [PHS] were doing satisfactory work."

In fact, from January 2008 to May 2009 (three months before Ellis died), PHS reported 169 sick call and pharmacy violations, and DOC imposed \$19,200 in penalties.

Despite deaths, the blistering *New York Times* exposé, and warnings by nurses and others, Vermont renewed PHS's contract for 2007. It let PHS cut twenty nursing shifts a week at Northwest, alter its contract to use LPNs rather than RNs as clinical coordinators and cut the inmate advocate position. Asked if money was the reason, Gendron, who earned \$14 an hour, says, "I'll never be sure."

Much of PHS's performance is self-reported, and state monitoring relies on limited resources as well as good intentions. Almost five years ago, Pallito was DOC management executive when an auditor's report on CMS found that Vermont had no real way to evaluate the quality of care. "We didn't belly up to the bar to monitor them," he says. "I think we have made some improvements."

Now DOC head, Pallito called Ellis's death "an isolated incident. ... [PHS has]

been in Vermont for four years. On balance, it was not bad."

Bad or not, PHS is exiting the revolving door and Correct Care Solutions (CCS) is entering. They have much in common. Both, are for-profit providers, and both have shared the same CEO, Gerald (Jerry) Boyle.

Before founding CCS in 2003, Boyle

headed PHS from 1998 to 2003, a period covered by the *Times* investigation that found PHS medical care "around the nation has provoked criticism from judges and sheriffs, lawsuits from inmates' families and whistle-blowers, and condemnations by federal, state and local authorities."

Boyle's Vermont connection goes back further. He was also a vice-president with EMSA when it was the state's first prison healthcare contractor.

Negotiations between Vermont and CCS are in the final stage, and it is likely that the new contractor will retain many of the same staff and, unless Vermont writes a very different contract, a tradition of medical lapses and lax oversight.

Gipe is hoping that inquiries into her granddaughter's death will spur reform. But if the investigation is confined to finger-pointing and narrow facts, the answers may obscure rather than reveal the extent and causes of a systemic breakdown that was remarkable for its tragic outcome rather than its particular errors.

Vermont, along with many other states, will still have to resolve the contradiction between the healthcare needs of an often despised population, and the demands of a private contractor for profit. In the latter, at least, PHS was successful: Healthcare revenues from continuing contracts for the third quarter of 2009—the quarter when Ellis died from lack of a \$4 bottle of pills—increased almost 28 percent over that quarter in 2008, to \$160 million. ■



Leftists, Liberals —and Losers?

How and why progressives
must unite for real change

BY G. WILLIAM DOMHOFF

As President Barack Obama's first year in office draws to a close, perhaps most *In These Times* readers feel the same way I do—more disappointed in the new administration and the Democratic Congress than I expected to be, even as I recognize dramatic changes since the Bush administration departed. Yet, I am even more

disappointed that we on the left (progressives, socialists, anti-corporate capitalists) seem to be missing opportunities to change the direction of our country.

Those of us who seek progressive social change in the United States have

made few advances in recent decades. This dearth of progress comes after a wealth of earlier successes: the organization of industrial unions, the creation and triumphs of the civil rights movement, and the successes of the feminist, environmentalist, LGBT and

living-wage movements.

One cause of our current lack of accomplishments is an impasse between the two main political forces working for social change—Democratic liberals and leftist progressives—who differ in both goals and strategies. Liberals sup-

port gradual changes through education, lobbying and elections to curb the worst excesses of our capitalist system and provide greater social benefits through government. Leftists argue for more radical changes to the status quo.

Rather than lament the failures of the Democrats in Washington or the past failures of leftists, I want to offer a concrete strategy for creating the change we all want. In this more hopeful post-Bush/

War and the rapacious destruction of the economy by the financial sector.

If the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to produce failure and American casualties (as is entirely likely), and if the Obama administration is unsuccessful in its efforts to deal with the current health, financial and employment crises (as looks increasingly likely), then a liberal-left program backed by nonviolent social disruption would resonate with those

shot, but thinking big is worthwhile in moments of great crisis.

SO YOU WANT TO WIN AN ELECTION

The structure of a nation's political party system influences how social change occurs. This country's two-party system renders third parties far smaller and more ephemeral than in other democracies. Yet many progressive activists opt for third

Why don't leftists connect with very many people, even though most Americans support greater equality, jobs for all, government support for education at all levels, government health insurance and much more? Maybe the problem is in the solutions the left offers, rather than people's unwillingness to support greater fairness and equality.

Cheney era, it is time to figure out how these two forces can rethink their strategies and create a coalition that could transform the nation.

Why don't leftists connect with very many people, even though most Americans support greater equality, jobs for all, government support for education at all levels, government health insurance and much more? Maybe the problem is in the solutions the left offers and the way we've framed them, rather than people's unwillingness to support greater fairness and equality. To overcome our relative marginalization, American leftists should create a strong new alliance with our more numerous brethren—the approximately 20 percent of Americans who define themselves as “liberal.”

Why an alliance? First, such an alliance might influence centrist Democrats in Washington if it could garner strong support from the Democratic base. Second, an alliance would have a chance to reach the American electorate's great middle, including independents who turned on the Republicans in 2006 and 2008 because of the failure of the Iraq

in the middle who have lost their jobs, homes, and/or life savings. This alliance would require progressives to make major changes in strategy, but not in values and goals; liberals would have to recognize that a constitutional democracy has room for far more economic egalitarianism than America has ever seen.

For liberals and leftists to successfully make change together, they must first reach an understanding, if not agreement, on four major areas:

- electoral strategy
- the crucial role of social movements
- the need for innovative economic models
- the definition of “us” vs. “them”

Here is a step-by-step approach for helping liberals and progressives find common ground. I am proposing a way for leftists to cooperate with liberals to generate short-term advances while at the same time competing with them for the allegiance of the majority to a strong egalitarian vision. In doing so I am claiming the fault is not in our values, but in our strategies. I am suggesting a “liberal egalitarianism.” Yes, it's a long

parties. The problem goes beyond the issue of leftist candidates becoming “spoilers.” Worse, it creates divisions among all those who are left of center and enables the election of conservatives, who are most insensitive to the needs of low-income people, people of color, women, environmentalists and religious minorities.

Further, progressives often fail to realize their power to influence the existing parties by challenging their platforms during the primaries. The gradual development of party primaries in the first 60 years of the 20th century led to the demise of the Democratic and Republican parties in the old sense of the term, with the power to expel members and pick their own candidates. The two major parties are now government-controlled pathways into elected government office. Anyone can register to be a member, and anyone can run in the primaries. Winners in the primaries put their coworkers into leadership positions in the party.

Progressives need to take advantage of the power this situation offers, rather than reject the two-party system. Party

Hope Is Not Change

Patience is not a virtue—and good things don't come to those who wait

BY DAVID SIROTA

WHEN YOU LOOK honestly at what's going on in our government right now, it's not clear that "change" was anything more than a cynical campaign slogan on a colorful t-shirt.

People are right to be angry. While we have certainly seen some encouraging progressive policy successes, the average person is nonetheless looking at an economy with a real unemployment rate of 17 percent—the highest since the Great Depression. And if they hear news of politicians at all, they either see them taking 15 different positions on the most simple issues, or raising boatloads of cash from the same corporate fat cats who got the country into this mess.

We must realize that politics is serious, and at this time it behooves us

to change our attitude and adjust our perspective.

Parties and politicians are means to an end—not an end unto themselves. Some Democratic partisans insist that efforts to pressure President Obama and congressional Democrats are disloyal or traitorous—as if the objective in American democracy is to preserve a politician's power.

That, of course, isn't the goal—the goal, as Barack Obama's fellow community organizers know, is to turn people's "hope" into real "change."

If passing a serious Wall Street reform bill means embarrassing every member of Congress to the point where their approval ratings are in the toilet, then that's what we have to do. If passing a universal healthcare bill means humiliating our senators into

consistently strong stands, then that's what we have to do. If passing the kinds of tax and spending policies that can get us out of the recession means constantly pressuring Barack Obama, then that's what we have to do. And the good news is, the more all of these political leaders listen to this grassroots pressure, the better they will fare at the polls come election time. And should they not listen, perhaps it is time for them to face a primary challenge.

Some say contested Democratic primaries weaken the electoral chances of Democratic candidates in general elections. That's untrue on many levels.

The last hotly contested Democratic U.S. Senate primary in the Mountain West occurred in 2006 in Montana. You'll recall that the Democratic Party's Big Money tried to force a guy named

primaries open the way for leftists and liberals to disagree within the political arena while moving the Democratic Party in their common direction. Progressives at the state, congressional, district and local levels should form their own democratic clubs within the Democratic Party—essentially parties within the party—that would give them an organizational base and a distinctive social identity in the political arena. For example, in Michigan, a group of progressives who met through MoveOn house parties established Harbor Country Progress, an official Democratic Party club that is changing the political landscape in the state's rural 6th Congressional District. (See "Building the Left in Harbor Country" by Jim Vopat, ITT, October 2009.)

Forming such clubs allows activists

to maintain their primary social and political identities while at the same time enabling them to compete within the Democratic Party. They can run candidates on strong progressive platforms in the primaries if and when the issues, circumstances and candidates seem right. They would campaign to win on the basis of our program and make no personal criticisms of their Democratic rivals. (Yes, corporate Democrats will outspend leftist Democrats, but this will happen whether leftists run in third parties or Democratic Party primaries.)

Should they lose, they would still back the winner of the primary in the general election. Being seen as a loyal Democrat is essential to gaining the confidence of the Democratic electorate and eventually transforming the Democratic Party itself.

This does not mean progressive activists should drop their many current social movement efforts and focus their energies on electoral politics alone. But electoral politics are essential to any program for progressive social change. Insisting on sticking with third parties or ignoring the electoral process ensures failure.

SPARKS, CRACKS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Social movements are necessary for social change. They help mobilize the electorate. A handful of dedicated activists can provide the spark to find cracks and openings in the power structure, and develop ways to draw everyday people out of their routines in order to make history. The key is finding the right strategy and focusing on an agenda that engages people at a

Jon Tester out of that primary race. Had Tester not run that race, Democrats would have coronated Tester's opponent, State Auditor John Morrison—a candidate with a potentially devastating personal scandal in his closet who would have been crushed in the general election by the Republican incumbent, Sen. Conrad Burns. As Tester told the Senate Democratic Caucus when he arrived in Washington, primaries make candidates stronger.

But even more important than the candidate vetting value of primaries is the issue pressure that primaries create. Whereas Republican primaries tend to create competition between candidates seeking to show who is a more extremist conservative, Democratic primaries tend to create competition between candidates seeking to show who is more in touch with the concerns of most voters. In working to win the Democratic nomination, candidates have to show who is more committed to universal healthcare, Wall Street reform, environmental protection and ending adventurist wars—that is, to show who is more committed to issue positions that are popular among both the Demo-



On Nov. 7, 2006, then Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Jon Tester hops a fence as he works on his farm in Big Sandy, Montana.

cratic primary and general electorate.

Those who wring their hands about Democratic primary challengers—whether Big Money donors, organized interest groups, cynical political power brokers or the ever-present pundit consultants—and who have sought to stop primary challengers represent the same status quo that drove this country into a ditch. It is a status quo that sees democracy as a threat rather than a cure. And

yet had we had more democracy—had we had a Congress that responded to the longtime public demand for health-care reform, an end to the Iraq War and more serious corporate regulation—we wouldn't be in the trouble we're now in.

For those that urge caution, let's be clear: patience is not a virtue—in fact, it's the last refuge of the status quo and a rationale used by some of the most despicable forces in our past.

particular moment.

Strategic nonviolence is the only form of disruption that makes any sense in an advanced capitalist democracy where most people accept the political norms of the society. According to polls, from the 1960s to the 1980s, the American public became more receptive to a wide range of issues championed by egalitarian movements, such as women's rights. At the same time, most Americans disapproved of the anti-war movement, which employed violent and disorderly tactics. Thus the civil rights movement, not the anti-war movement, is the prototype of what is necessary and possible.

Today's crises could—and should—catalyze new social movements. Some smaller current actions to prevent foreclosures, stop the abuse of workers and target health insurance companies show that civil disobedience can be effective.

Sit-ins that close banks, insurance offices, healthcare offices or government offices could become the order of the day. The escalation in Afghanistan and/or the failure to leave Iraq might lead to anti-war actions in the face of mounting casualties that are destroying families across the nation for reasons that continue to be unclear and unconvincing.

Activists must once again be trained in strategic nonviolence. We also need new leaders who are as committed to civil disobedience as Martin Luther King, Jr. and César Chávez were.

Faced with the choice between seeing large numbers of people incarcerated or making major concessions, the Obama administration might abandon centrist economics and stand up to Blue Dog Democrats, rather than standing idle while local and state law enforcement officials descend into a predictable repressive cycle.

EGALITARIANISM THROUGH THE MARKET?

The importance of an alternative economic vision cannot be overestimated in understanding the success of past movements for progressive social change, especially in energizing left-wing activists.

Socialism was once such a vision, with a foundation in government ownership of the means of production and centralized planning. But the past 60 to 80 years have shown that this alternative cannot work in an egalitarian and democratic way. Even if government planners had enough information and the technocratic capacity to generate an optimal plan, and if democratic pressure was able to keep the bureaucracy from becoming elitist—two big ifs—the process would end up hierarchical and nonparticipatory. That's because information goes upward and orders and commands flow downward in

Those who look at the crises our states and country face and look at the legislative opportunity Democrats hold and nonetheless argue for “patience” are making the very same “don’t go too fast” argument made against every step forward we’ve ever taken. They are the Father Coughlins arguing against the New Deal, the Goldwaterites opposing Medicare, the tea party protestors angrily snarling at minorities and the uninsured.

Forty years from now, America won’t remember the vote counts on specific bills (does anyone remember the vote count to pass Medicare?) and they won’t remember the name of the legislators or the senator or the governors in office. They will remember that we didn’t use this fleeting window of political opportunity.

They’ll remember the results. And to get those results, we must know that this is not a game and patience is not a virtue. ■

This article was adapted from the keynote speech to the Democratic Party of Denver’s annual Edward M. Kennedy Dinner on Nov. 7, 2009.

such a system, as the libertarian socialist economist Robin Hahnel shows in his seminal book *Economic Justice and Democracy* (2005).

The failure of socialism worldwide has left egalitarians without a vision of a better economic model since the 1980s. But the implosion of the American economy demonstrates that a free-market approach is deeply flawed, and those who continue to put their faith in the market are as delusional as their counterparts who support central planning.

I suggest leftists think in terms of a fact that has been overlooked until recent years. Markets can be socialized to serve collective purposes by using four well-known policy tools as carrots and sticks: subsidies, taxes, government purchases and regulations. That is, there can be conscious and planned

Mobilized in Motor City

How Detroit DSA works in the Democratic Party to effect change

BY SETH A. MAXON

DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS IN southeastern Michigan can do something most of their counterparts across the nation cannot: they can boast of electoral victories. Moreover, they possess a level of influence within the Michigan Democratic Party of which many American leftists dream. And they’ve done it all without compromising their beliefs or values.

Their success has come from working with, instead of against, local Democrats.

“It starts out with relationships,” says David Green, the chair of the Detroit chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the organization that is a descendent of the Socialist Party of Eugene Victor Debs. He continues, “Mark Brewer, the chair of the

Michigan Democratic Party, has a very good relationship with us. He’s spoken to our local several times. The chairs of the county parties, several of them are close friends as well.”

Since 1998, Detroit DSA, with about 250 members, has successfully partnered with local county chairs and other Democratic Party officials to promote and elect several progressive candidates to the Michigan state legislature. One of these candidates, State Rep. John Espinoza, was even elected in the heavily conservative “Thumb” region of the state. In 2004, with the backing of Detroit DSA, Espinoza became the first Democrat and the first Latino ever elected to represent Michigan’s 83rd District.

The secret to their success, says Green, is thinking strategically.

interventions in the market in the name of greater equality and participation. I contend that this is a form of planning that makes use of markets even though some of their more dangerous qualities would not be fully tamed. It is a form of planning that the current American government has the power and experience to institute through Congress and a variety of government agencies.

The best example of how the government currently shapes markets concerns the annual battle in Congress between heavy industry and environmentalists over energy policy. Environmentalists call for higher taxes on fossil fuels, subsidies for renewable energy sources and regulations that force automobile manufacturers and utilities to burn fuels more efficiently and cleanly. The oil, coal, automobile and utility companies demand low taxes

on fossil fuels, subsidies for fossil fuels and minimal or no regulations relating to efficiency or pollution, which in effect is a very different plan. If the environmentalists’ plan were to prevail, the United States could gradually wean itself from foreign oil and clean up the air and water at the same time.

The answer is not to be found in economics, but in politics. It is a matter of who has the power. Once the left accepts that there will be markets and private property, all the talk about the sanctity of markets become a rationale elites use to maintain their privileges.

Taming the market through collective action is the basic strategy of living-wage campaigns, which use laws to force employers to pay higher wages. Laws regarding affirmative action, sexual harassment and discrimination also operate through

"As a small organization, how can we make a difference? We leverage our forces. We put our efforts towards a progressive Democrat challenging a Republican, or a progressive Democrat challenging a centrist Democrat [in a primary]."

"We don't pick symbolic victories," Green says, "We pick things we can win."

After deciding whom to support, Detroit DSA carefully chooses tactics that will have the greatest impact, all of which are based on the leftist tradition of on-the-ground, grassroots action.

Green holds initial fundraisers for progressive Democratic candidates in his own home, where he invites friends and allies to come meet the candidates and contribute to their campaigns. These fundraisers bring in several thousand dollars, which, according to Green, is more than enough to get a fledgling statehouse race off the ground, providing crucial support to underfunded progressive candidates entering politics for the first time.

To build on the initial fundraising push, a core of Detroit DSA goes door-to-door to distribute literature and answer questions about their candidates.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID GREEN

Rep. David Bonior (D-Mich), the former Democratic Whip in the House, shares a stage with Detroit Democratic Socialists of America Chair David Green (right).

These activists also participate in phone banking and email campaigns. As part of this effort, Green instructs his members not to identify themselves as DSA members, to avoid the knee-jerk reaction many still have toward people who self-identify as "socialists."

Indeed, Detroit DSA has come under

fire from Republicans and Democrats for being a "socialist" organization. Earlier this year, the pro-free-market, Michigan-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy asked the question, "Are socialists deciding close state house races?" In addition, in previous elections, Detroit DSA candidates have

the market. The real issue, again, is political power.

A reconstructed market system—featuring a more progressive tax structure, higher inheritance taxes and a transaction tax on financial trades—could be much more open and flexible than the one that currently exists in the United States. For example, it is possible to have many different types of enterprises compete in the market, not just privately owned corporations. There could be a combination of cooperatives, state-owned companies, and private companies—a "mixed enterprise system," to recycle an old phrase.

Although this program does not build on libertarian socialists' economic ideas, in which markets are eliminated, it does fit with their emphasis on the need for socialists to work within reformist coalitions to help move things in a leftward direction. If their *political* approach were

adopted by all leftists attracted to a form of socialism, then everyone, including liberals, could be focused on winning the power to legislate the changes that might make more radical change more attractive to voters further down the line.

For now, it's time for leftists to think in terms of a new vision: socializing and taming markets through many different types of government interventions.

REFRAMING US VS. THEM

Social movements use an "us" vs. "them" framework to mobilize opposition to existing power arrangements. However, any framing of "them" that uses categories from which individuals cannot escape—social class of origin, race, gender or sexual orientation—is a mistake that creates a self-fulfilling prophecy and overlooks the possibility that people can change their minds.

Although the power structure in a capitalist society revolves around classes and class conflict, it does not follow that political conflict should be framed in terms of social classes or class struggle. Political conflict should be framed in terms of values, coalitions and power—not class.

Again, the civil rights movement provides a model. The enemy was defined as racists and bigots, not whites in general. The movement was able to use the Christian concepts of forgiveness, redemption and conversion in the service of strategic nonviolence to forge a black/white coalition. Thus people were able to change their attitudes and join the movement. They weren't excluded on the basis of being white.

Since a cross-class coalition is necessary to assemble a majority for an egalitarian economic program in the 21st century, it is better to begin with a political framing

been “red-baited” by both Republican opponents and mainstream newspapers. Detroit DSA’s support became an issue in another state-house race, in which the Republican candidate commissioned robo calls that accused her opponent, Democrat Vicki Barnett, of being a socialist.

Such red-baiting, though unsuccessful (both Barnett and Brown went on to win their elections, the former by a landslide), has prevented Detroit DSA from getting involved in higher profile races. The group offered to support progressive Democratic candidates in two congressional races in 2008: Gary Peters (9th district) and Mark Schauer (7th district), both of whom went on to victory. Green says that the candidates themselves were happy to have Detroit DSA’s involvement, but that “handlers” from the Democratic National Committee (DNC) refused the support, for fear that the candidates would be red-baited or branded as socialists.



David Green

Commitment to social movements

Despite the organization’s involvement in electoral politics, Detroit DSA has not given up on its commitment to social movements.

Over the past decade, the group has successfully waged six local living-wage campaigns in southeastern Michigan, utilizing many of the same methods they use to get out the vote. In 1998, thanks partly to the work of Detroit DSA, a living-wage ordinance passed on the ballot in Detroit with 80 percent

support. Since then, the group has led other successful campaigns to establish a living wage in the cities of Warren, Eastpointe and Ferndale, and in the counties of Wayne and Macomb.

In 2006, Detroit DSA also led a successful anti-sweatshop campaign at Wayne State University, which thanks to the group’s efforts, no longer sells merchandise made in sweatshops.

Green insists that the social movement activism is as important as Detroit DSA’s electoral work.

“If all we did was work on electing progressive Democrats, we’d be guilty of some of the accusations our opponents give us, that the DSA is just an appendage of the Democratic Party ... that we’re political hacks. If all we do is movement work, that’s kind of naïve. The way change happens in this country is by winning elections. That’s how you gain power and make change. You have to have both.”

Looking to the future

Green is confident that the DNC’s rejection of his organization’s support

of the “us” vs. “them” issue that does not define one class or another as the enemy. Instead, the opposition should be all those who favor pro-corporate policies and fight against the program of the liberal-left alliance. If the conflict is framed in this way, a liberal-left alliance has a chance to win over the moderates, neutrals and independents who currently identify with corporate capitalists. It might even attract dissident members of the capitalist class who transcend their class interests, and in the process help legitimize the movement to those in the middle who are hesitant to climb on board.

THE CHALLENGE FOR LIBERALS

It is my belief that today’s liberals might find this framework a useful one for their own purposes. They

might agree that the energy and dedication leftists bring to the alliance through their social movements help to make possible what later become liberal legislative victories. They also might agree that it would be a fair trade to accept competition in Democratic primaries from leftists if leftists completely abandoned potentially divisive involvement in third parties and put some of their energies into regular elections as well.

Based on the past liberal emphasis on the importance of private property and minimal government interference in the workings of the economy, taming the market in a major way through government intervention, along with public ownership of some enterprises, might be difficult for many liberals to accept. However, as the liberal sociologist Douglas Massey forcefully argued

in *The Return of the “L” Word* (2005), markets should be very heavily “policed” by government. His argument is noteworthy because it suggests a narrowing of the gap between leftists and liberals when it comes to creating a more egalitarian economy through government intervention. Moreover, many modern-day liberals agree to a mix of ownership forms as long as there are clear protections for private property.

None of the points in this article is original, but they add up to a program that has never been tried, a program that many liberals might support. It unites electoral and non-electoral strategies, bypasses the structural impossibilities of third parties and non-market centralized planning, reaffirms the importance of social movements, and provides an “us” vs. “them” framing that allows people to change

will change. In the 2008 cycle, support from Detroit DSA helped to push progressive candidates over the top in close races, in traditionally Republican regions, and in races where their candidates were red-baited. They continue to lead living-

thin majority) has to redistrict the state. With Detroit DSA's support, Green says, the Democrats can help avoid Republican dominance and gerrymandering.

Through it all, though, he says, the democratic socialists will stick to their

In 1998, thanks partly to the work of Detroit DSA, a living-wage ordinance passed on the ballot in Detroit with 80 percent support. Since then, the group has led other successful campaigns to establish a living wage in the cities of Warren, Eastpointe and Ferndale, and in the counties of Wayne and Macomb.

wage campaigns and other social movements that mainstream Democrats can support without controversy.

The upcoming 2010 elections are particularly important for Detroit DSA. Three-quarters of Michigan's state senators are up for re-election, and the new census numbers will mean the legislature (where Republicans in the senate have a

guns and stay committed to long-term progressive change.

"We have to continue to be progressive so people will say, you know, it's worth working with these people. And we can handle any flack that comes from the right wing. That takes a little backbone, a little experience ... and it doesn't happen overnight." ■

their minds and thereby join what could become a new majority.

Today, the large bloc of Southern and rural non-Southern Democrats that stopped or moderated liberal initiatives in the 1930s and 1960s is down to a nub in Congress. Unemployment and foreclosures are predicted to remain high for at least two years due to an economic crisis that may not be solvable without liberal economic policies that will involve increasing government intervention in the economy. The unnecessary and unwinnable war in Afghanistan is causing increasing casualties and will cost trillions of dollars if it continues for very long. The high expectations created by the election of Barack Obama and large Democratic majorities in Congress are dissipating rapidly. And Americans know from experience—and a look at other countries—that many changes in

the economy can be carried out democratically and without loss of freedoms.

Liberals and leftists have had new opportunities in the past, but they never have had one this good. ■

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Bigger Than Obama

Blaming the president for the slow pace of reform is too simplistic

BY RICHARD FLACKS



THE ONE-YEAR ANNIVERSARY of the presidential election provides a hook for all kinds of venting.

"Now, today, the Big Hope president has virtually nothing of import to show for nearly a year in office," David Michael Green, a Hofstra University professor, writes on his website, *The Regressive Antidote*. He then offers a stream of vituperation about Obama's failure to lead, capitulation to the right, and lack of political sense and vision. Green doesn't analyze these alleged failures; he simply savages the president's personal qualities.

Ironically, Green's attack came as the House of Representatives made history by passing national health insurance reform legislation. Of course, the House bill doesn't live up to everything the president promised, and the final version that gets through the Senate and reconciliation and then lands on his desk is likely

to be even further from ideal. But we have been waiting 70 years to witness any movement toward universal healthcare and are now on the cusp of seeing it.

Many critics correctly question Obama's reliance on Wall Street enablers for key economic advice, and doubt the Obama team can reverse the rising tide of unemployment and underemployment. There is deep anxiety about the president's decision to send more troops to Afghanistan, despite growing evidence that this war is as foolish, futile and feckless as any military adventure the United States has previously undertaken. And Obama has not consistently taken the high road on global warming, workers' rights, gay rights and civil liberties.

Blaming Obama, however, is simplistic. Yes, he has to be held to the promises he articulated and the hope he inspired. But the first question we must ask is why those hopes and promises are so elusive.

Is it really because Obama and his administration have betrayed us, or demonstrated their weakness or cowardice, or were tricksters from the start? A more accurate diagnosis would start instead with the fact that all of the major reforms promised have been fiercely resisted by the main centers of power in society—the corporate elite and the military industrial complex.

People on the left typically use a power structure analysis to explain the limits of democracy in the United States. Yet, for some reason, many people seem to have hoped that Obama would override all that, and do so in less than a year.

Obama, however, knew from the start that his stated goals would be powerfully resisted. Accordingly, he has spent his first year in office devising compromises to help overcome some of that resistance, so that a semblance of reform might happen.

To understand this, consider the positions of the corporate and bureaucratic

power centers:

- Key representatives and senators are financed by the very corporate interests that need to be reformed. If a piece of proposed legislation would harm those corporate interests, those legislators can be counted on to block it and propose more lenient rules. Corporate lobbyists actually write many of the laws that are supposed to regulate their clients.
- Corporate and military interests have access and influence in the mass media. Any progressive change the president proposes can trigger charges that his administration is weak on national security matters. When JFK contemplated aborting the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, he was warned that former President Dwight Eisenhower would publicly campaign against him. Today, we hear rumors in the press that if Obama fails to follow the demands of General McChrystal for a troop buildup in Afghanistan, General Petraeus will resign and run for president against him.
- Corporate and financial decision-makers—the “investment class”—have a huge influence over markets and the economy as a whole, precisely because they control the flow and pace of investment. Because the most rational healthcare reform, a type of ‘Medicare for all,’ would wipe out the giant health insurance corporations and shift power away from the pharmaceutical industry, fears of an investor revolt make single payer “politically impossible.” If the president were to push for true health reform, he would risk the wrath of the investment class.

In the face of resistance, President Obama formulated a strategy to deliver needed reforms. He reassured Wall Street by appointing Tim Geithner and Larry Summers to run economic policy and financial reform; he forced key congresspersons to “own” healthcare reform by giving them responsibility for shaping the legislation, and he compromised with drug and hospital lobbies; he moved slowly with reforms affecting the CIA and Pentagon; and he backed a “cap and trade” approach to carbon emission control.

We remember FDR, JFK and LBJ as bold reformist presidents, forgetting their actual records. FDR made major and harmful compromises on social security, the Wagner Act and civil rights. Kennedy tried mightily to contain the civil rights movement and ordered FBI surveillance of Martin Luther King. He launched a huge arms race with the USSR, was afraid

People on the left make a serious mistake by blaming Obama for the slow pace of reform, and becoming disillusioned. Disillusionment leads to demoralization, not action.

to recognize Communist China and invaded Cuba. Johnson could not figure out how to end the Vietnam War, even though he believed it would destroy his legacy. And his great healthcare reform, Medicare, was itself a compromise, covering only those over 65.

The entire history of successful reform emanating from the White House is replete with corporate and political compromises. Always ingrained in the thought process of successful politicians is the mantra we now hear channeled through Rahm Emanuel, who says, in effect: ‘We can’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good. We need to pass something even if it is quite flawed. We can work to improve it down the line.’ Such maxims summarize the limits of presidential power in the face of power elite resistance.

People on the left make a serious mistake by blaming the president for the slow pace of reform, and becoming disillusioned. Disillusionment leads to demoralization, not action. On the other hand, the leaders of progressive organizations on the national level have so far been making an even bigger mistake: spending their resources on mobilizing support for the White House agenda. What we need from here on in is a national coalition aimed at mobilizing grassroots support for “keeping the promises”—a coalition that aims beyond what is immediately possible, and makes strategic demands that challenge the agenda of the president and his party.

Right now, such demands could include:

- a real jobs program that builds in the green economy but seeks more rapid expansion of employment opportunity than anything now on the agenda;
- carbon control targets more far-reaching than current legislation contemplates;

- a binding timetable for ending U.S. troop involvement in Afghanistan as well as Iraq, emphasizing that the massive war budget endangers any hope for change.

These goals are interrelated. A massive investment in renewable energy, conservation and alternative transportation will create jobs. Investment funding can come from reducing the war budgets. Energy alternatives will reduce the obsession with Middle East oil that drives our international policy.

A revitalized progressive coalition at the national level, independent of the Obama administration but embracing its original goals, would be a counterweight to the corporate, financial and military sectors that currently hold sway. Indeed, such a coalition should aim to encourage divisions in the power elite—a vibrant, green economy would benefit businesses, and relief from the wars would be welcomed by many in the military.

During the campaign, Barack Obama repeatedly said that change was up to us. He can be a great president, if and when we make him one. ■

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An eviction team removes belongings left behind during foreclosure proceedings on a home June 3, in Lafayette, Colo.

Why Year One Matters

Don't listen to apologists who say Obama's first year in office is not important, and who insist Americans must be patient for change

BY DAVID SIROTA

WHEN THE *NEW YORK Times'* John Harwood recently reported that a top Obama adviser told him that progressives "need to take off the pajamas, get dressed and realize that governing a closely divided country is complicated and difficult," it was a rejoinder that expressed far more than Establishment disdain for grassroots pressure and activism. It represented a deeper assertion, pervasive in political circles, that says citizens of all ideological stripes must be patient with an Obama White House that has only been in office for a year.

This is a message that will fill airwaves, magazine covers and newspaper pages when our nation takes stock of 2009. More than anything, we will be told that a first-

term president's inaugural year means nothing—and that to expect anything more than nothing is unrealistic. Indeed, the White House's refrain that "governing a closely divided country is complicated and difficult" is a euphemism for "stop pushing so hard," "don't expect so much change so quickly," "we can't try to do too much too fast" and every other dollop of hackneyed conventional wisdom.

In one sense, there's nothing surprising about this coming from Washington. Beltway journalists, pundits and politicians are inclined to despise anything even vaguely grassroots in nature, because anything grassroots in nature fundamentally challenges their institutional authority and power. But in another sense, it's shocking that the same Beltway culture that so consistently venerates the

political vehemence, aggressiveness and legacy of Ronald Reagan would manufacture a conventional wisdom insisting that the first year of a president's first term is the time for patience.

Recall this passage from McGill University historian Gil Troy's Reagan biography, *Morning in America*, that explains how most of the major legislative initiatives that have come to be called the Reagan Revolution happened in 1981:

That summer of 1981, Reaganism peaked. The Reagan legislative steamroller continued to flatten the Democratic opposition in the Congress with the passage of Kemp-Roth tax cuts on the heels of the Stockman-Weinberger mix of social program cuts and defense increases ... [Reagan] had solidified his image as a no-nonsense leader determined to repudiate his predecessors' weaknesses ...

JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES

By September, however, the Democrats counterattacked...his rivals blamed him for the growing recession. Much of the next seven and a quarter years would be spent scrambling on the scrimmage line Reagan and his men had initially reached with breakneck speed. If the first half-year of the Reagan era could be considered to be a conservative blitzkrieg, politically the next seven and a half years became trench warfare. Reagan failed to advance his revolution much further... From refreshing, cleansing, sometimes inspiring, sometimes terrifying promises of revolution in 1981 would emerge a frustrating, polarizing, enervating legislative gridlock.

For reference, Reagan was elected in 1980 by a smaller percentage than Barack Obama was elected in 2008, and therefore Reagan had a much smaller legislative mandate than Obama. Additionally, while Obama came into office with polls giving him high marks and voters giving him huge majorities in both houses of Congress, Reagan came to Washington with polls showing him one of the most unpopular presidents entering office, with Republicans controlling only one house of Congress (the Senate), and only by a very narrow majority (53 votes).

The dichotomy is obvious: The Reagan administration, facing huge political obstacles, powered through the bulk of the Reagan Revolution's legislative agenda in his first year in office. The Obama administration, with far fewer political obstacles, has spent the first year slow-walking priorities like Wall Street reform and climate change; watering down health-care reform; supporting the extension of controversial Bush administration policies like the USA PATRIOT Act; quietly avoiding any leadership role on social issues like gay marriage and abortion; and escalating the war in Afghanistan. As comedian Jimmy Fallon joked, "Obama says it's all part of his plan to finally deliver on the campaign promises made by John McCain."

The Obama White House has responded by telling Americans to sit tight—a "patience first" posture that is particularly odd coming from Obama. After all, he was the guy who, in January of 2008, said that he

more than any other presidential candidate would emulate Reagan's aggressiveness.

"Ronald Reagan changed the trajectory of America in a way that Richard Nixon did not, and a way that Bill Clinton did not," Obama told the *Reno Gazette-Journal's* editorial board, adding that he wants "a return to that sense of dynamism."

Presidents are most powerful in their first year. They have election mandates behind them (well, maybe not Bush) and they have the chance to change the paradigms of their predecessors.

To be sure, Reagan was pushing an agenda backed by Big Money, and Obama promised to push an agenda that would challenge Big Money—so the former's charge was easier than the latter's. Additionally, compared to the Bush era, Obama's success kickstarting a national discussion about some of the biggest issues represents genuine progress. Indeed, considering the scope of the promises Obama made and the size of the problems he pledged to confront, it's no small first-year accomplishment to have vigorous debates about such intractable challenges as healthcare, global warming and structural economic reform.

And that gets back to the key point: As voters take stock of their president's first year, they will inevitably hear a cacaphony of reporters and administration officials berate that very metric of evaluation, insisting the one-year mark means nothing—when in fact it often means everything.

It is not just Reagan who made his mark at the beginning of his term. FDR, unlike Obama, began his first year in office, 1933, by reforming the financial system and pouring money into the economy via public works relief programs like Civilian Conservation Corps. That early action positioned the Democrats to win big in 1934, ushering in the most

radical Congress in American history. Similarly, George W. Bush, in a gift to the rich, pushed through the largest tax cut in U.S. history in 2001, setting the direction of economic policy for the next seven years—or, one could argue due to the failure of Obama and the Democratic Congress to rescind those cuts, the next nine.

Presidents are most politically powerful in their first year. They have election mandates behind them (well, maybe not Bush) and they have the chance to change the paradigms of their predecessors. The longer they wait, the more the opposition is emboldened and the harder it is to pass anything.

Therein lies the lesson: History has shown that the longer delay is tolerated, justified or rationalized in the early days of a presidency, the less likely the rhetoric of "hope" becomes the legislation of change. ■



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BY GEORGE KENNEY

This Is Your Country on Drugs

Melody Petersen has been writing about the pharmaceutical industry for more than 10 years, including as a staff reporter for the *New York Times*. Her recent book, *Our Daily Meds: How the Pharmaceutical Companies Transformed Themselves into Slick Marketing Machines and*

Hooked the Nation on Prescription Drugs (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), should be required reading for anyone who's serious about healthcare reform.

What is the most outrageous thing you have seen while covering the drug industry?

I went to a conference where the title of one talk that jumped out at me was "Creating a Disease." A drug company executive got up on stage with a PowerPoint presentation and explained how his company had created a disease—overactive bladder. The company owned a pill for incontinence, but the market for incontinence is very low because mostly elderly people suffer from it, and doctors try to manage this in a non-pharmaceutical way. Even though this drug works on your bladder, it is very hard on your brain. It can cause severe memory problems. But the company wanted to expand the market so it created this disease called "overactive bladder" or "OAB," which it defined as needing to go to the bathroom more than nine times a day. And now you see ads for this drug, Detrol, for overactive bladders. It became a blockbuster.

As you say in the title of your book, it's all a huge marketing machine. In Europe and Canada they pay less for drugs and take fewer.

Two-thirds of men, women and children in the United States take at least one prescription drug. And children in the United States are three times more likely

to take anti-depressants and psychiatric drugs as children in Europe. We spend at least \$300 billion a year on prescription drugs. That is about twice than what we spend on higher education.

The United States ranks 50th in life expectancy, according to the CIA. Today a 65-year-old Mexican man will live longer than a 65-year-old American man. How important are those international comparisons?

We are paying more in healthcare per person than any other country. In our economy, almost one out of every five dollars is spent on healthcare, and it continues to rise at a rate greater than inflation. You would think that with us spending so much, we would be at the top of the life expectancy ranking.

The implicit argument is that in addition to all the other problems, we are suffering from an excess dosage of drugs. This goes back to the marketing. What does the bulk of the marketing go into?

Most of the marketing dollars are spent on physicians. When the drug ads on television say, "Ask your doctor about this drug," the drug companies have already been to your physician and made sure he or she was ready to prescribe it. A survey of physicians a couple years ago found that more than nine out of ten had recently taken some sort of gift or cash from the drug companies. And many doctors are taking hundreds of thousands of dollars a

year from these drug companies, working as consultants and advisers.

You write that these drug companies are not developing drugs that could be more useful in the world, but drugs that could be more profitable here at home.

That is one of the tragedies about this situation. The drug companies focus on maladies like depression and high cholesterol and anxiety—things that impact large portions of the American public. They are not interested in cures, because if you cure somebody of the disease they don't take the drug for long periods of time.

And they are not interested in tropical diseases like malaria. People in Africa desperately need medicine, but the drug companies know Africans are too poor to pay for the medicines. They want to sell drugs to Americans.

There is no incentive to discover truly great medicines. To get a drug through the FDA you don't have to prove the drug is better than a drug already on the market. All you have to prove is the drug is better than a placebo.

In 1992, the law changed to allow the drug companies to pay large fees to the FDA so their drugs can be approved faster. Before 1992, the FDA had one customer and that was the public. Now the FDA has two customers: the public and the drug executives.

Is the system corrupt?

Some of these cases are incredibly outrageous. Like Vioxx, a pain reliever that 20 million Americans took before Merck took it off the market because it increased the risk of a heart attack and stroke. The FDA estimated that as many as 50,000 Americans may have died from that drug.

Are there lawyers out there fighting the big pharmaceutical companies?

Thousands of lawsuits have been filed against the drug companies. The federal



MOLLY HAWKEY

"I think some of the top pharmaceutical executives should face criminal charges," says Melody Petersen, author of *Our Daily Meds*.

government has collected billions of dollars from the industry to settle charges of illegal marketing. But the drug companies just raise their prices, so they can pay out half a billion dollars on lawsuits, and continue doing exactly what they have been doing. It's an endless cycle. I think some of the top pharmaceutical executives should face criminal charges, so they would think twice about allowing these fraudulent practices.

There is the suggestion of simply banning the pharmaceutical companies from paying off doctors.

The rule now is that the FDA will approve a drug for a certain condition. A drug can be approved for depression, for instance. And, the drug companies are not supposed to market that drug for anything other than depression. But the doctor can prescribe the drug for whatever they want. That is the loophole the drug companies have tried to exploit.

For example, executives at Warner-Lambert, which is now part of Pfizer, decided they wanted the doctors to prescribe the epilepsy drug Neurontin for attention deficit disorder, restless leg disorder, bipolar disorder. Just about anything

that is related to the brain.

So what Pfizer did was invite doctors to dinner. The doctors were paid \$500 to come to the dinners and listen to a speech by another physician who would talk about how, even though Neurontin was approved for epilepsy, they could also prescribe it for bipolar disorder. Neurontin was soon a billion-dollar drug, and 90 percent of the prescriptions were written for things other than epilepsy.

Do you know of another industrial country that does not negotiate with drug companies for better prices?

No, the United States is the only country in the world that allows the drug companies to charge whatever they want.

You write that there are two pharmaceutical lobbyists for every member of Congress. What are they doing on Capitol Hill?

The pharmaceutical industry fights against any measure that threatens its profits. Present law gives the drug companies a 20-year patent on each drug. During that time, they have a monopoly in the market. They can charge whatever they want for that drug. They have fought against any measure to allow more rea-

sonable drug prices.

There was this deal reported, and denied, that they met with Mr. Obama and he agreed to help them.

Yes, the industry said they met with the president this past summer and that in this meeting the companies agreed to put \$80 billion on the table. But the drug companies have been increasing prices like mad this year, so nobody is quite sure what this "\$80 billion" really amounts to. In exchange for this \$80 billion, the drug executives say that the president agreed not to change the law to allow Medicare to use its purchasing power to negotiate drug prices and also agreed not to allow drugs to come from Canada, which are much lower priced.

Just for comparison, the Veterans Administration does negotiate prices. And it gets a better deal than Medicare.

Yes, a much, much better deal. But with that off the table, the drug companies are set up once again. If this healthcare legislation passes they are going to get millions of new patients and continue to charge whatever they wish.

Where do you think healthcare reform is headed?

We need everyone to have access to healthcare. But there is nothing in these bills that would control costs. It's not just the cost of drugs that is the problem, it is the cost of everything. There have been studies that show one-third to as much as one-half of the costs in our healthcare system are unwarranted. Not only are many of those drugs not needed, they have side effects that can make people sicker—but nothing in the proposed legislation makes our healthcare system less expensive or safer.

Our whole healthcare system is just driven by this profiteering, and it's not just the drug companies. If we could get some members in Congress to stand up and say, "We have had enough," and if the public would get up and say, "We have had enough," maybe, Washington would listen. ■

GEORGE KENNEY is a member of the In These Times Board of Editors. This exchange was adapted from a podcast interview on *ElectricPolitics.com*.



BY VALERIE SATUREN

Losing Liberal Arts

At the end of the 2007-2008 academic year, shrinking enrollment and a budget crisis forced Antioch College to close its doors after 156 years of progressive liberal arts education. Other liberal arts colleges and programs are under

similar stress. University of California-Santa Cruz is not accepting applications to its History of Consciousness for the 2010-2011 academic year. Goddard College underwent dramatic restructuring in 2002, and the New College of California ended operations in 2008. These losses are emblematic of the hardships facing liberal arts and humanities programs.

In light of rising costs, students fear liberal arts degrees are not worth the price tag. Consequently, interest in the liberal arts and humanities is on the wane, and the education they provide runs the risk of becoming restricted to elites who are rich in capital—cultural and otherwise. The liberal arts are

not the only source of a valuable education, but they place an unparalleled emphasis on critical thinking, integrated learning and civic engagement. The growing inaccessibility threatens to deepen the divide between a well-educated elite (once called the ruling class) and a technically proficient, but less broadly educated, middle and working class.

In the face of financial insecurity, students, colleges and universities have begun to calculate the value of higher education in terms of the “bottom line.” As tuition skyrockets and education becomes more unaffordable, students want assurances that their degrees will benefit them financially. A 2004 UCLA

survey of incoming freshmen at 700 colleges and universities reported that the top reasons chosen for going to college included “to get training for a specific career” (74.6 percent), “to be able to get a better job” (71.8 percent), and/or “to be able to make more money” (70.1 percent). Meanwhile, over the last 25 years tuition has risen by 440 percent—more than four times the rate of inflation.

A college degree is no longer a dependable ticket to a middle-class lifestyle. Though a 2006 study commissioned by the Association of American Colleges & Universities showed that business leaders seek employees with a wide base of skills and knowledge, recent graduates are not finding a higher education advantageous amid the economic downturn. The job market for college graduates dropped 40 percent in 2009, according to a Michigan State University study of 2,500 companies nationwide. For many graduates lucky enough to find employment, the recession has meant taking low-paying retail or customer service jobs while struggling to pay off student loans.

Meanwhile, colleges and universities are explicitly gearing their curricula toward the job market, including tailoring academic programs toward the needs of local corporations. Macalester College President Brian Rosenberg predicts that “20 years from now there will be fewer colleges that fall under the category of small residential liberal arts colleges.” Data on emerging trends seems to agree. In an article in *Inside Higher Ed*, “The Case of the Disappearing Liberal Arts College,” Roger G. Baldwin and Vicki L. Baker write that “national data on liberal arts colleges suggest that their numbers are decreasing as many evolve into ‘professional colleges’ or other types of higher education institutions.”

Some, like Massachusetts Higher Education Commissioner Richard M. Freeland, hail this development. Freeland is part of a movement to connect liberal arts and professional programs through the inclusion of internships, practical skill development, study abroad programs and experiential education. He argues that advocacy for a stronger emphasis on practi-

cal skills can complement the traditional goals of liberal learning.

Yet, it is unclear if liberal arts colleges will be able to undergo this transformation and retain their core missions. “Whether you can sustain the intensity of focus on the liberal arts portion while still doing

permanent, since departments will have demonstrated that they can function with fewer tenured faculty members.”

Students, too, are likely to face the long-lasting consequences of shrinking endowments at private colleges and budget cuts at public institutions.

By making a well-rounded education available only to the elite, we move one step closer to a society of two classes: one taught to think and rule and another groomed to follow and obey.

all those other things is an open question,” says Rosenberg.

As colleges and universities strive to become more profitable, faculty are coping with their own economic squeeze. Over the past three decades, colleges and universities have replaced tenure-track faculty positions with contract positions, often part-time. In his 2008 book *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (Fordham University Press), Ohio State University English professor Frank Donoghue writes that tenure-track and tenured professors now make up only 35 percent of college faculty, and that number is steadily falling. He notes that the decline in tenured positions has disproportionately affected faculty in liberal arts and humanities programs, which lack the government and private funding enjoyed by other departments. In turn, aspiring professors are becoming discouraged by the prospect of juggling multiple academic adjunct positions for little pay and no job security.

The current recession has greatly amplified existing pressures on liberal arts and humanities programs. Thomas H. Benton writes in his *Chronicle of Higher Education* article “Graduate School in the Humanities: Just Don’t Go,” that universities have “historically taken advantage of recessions to bring austerity to teaching” through hiring freezes, early retirements, and the replacement of tenured faculty with adjuncts. He writes, “When the recession ends, the hiring freezes will become

This past year, the director of financial aid at Reed College tasked the admissions team to not send acceptance letters to 100 scholarship students and instead find 100 students rich enough to pay \$49,950 per year for tuition, room and board. If liberal arts colleges such as Reed are unable to recover from financial hardship, they risk losing their economic, social and ethnic diversity. In turn, students lacking a privileged background may be denied access to a liberal arts education, regardless of their achievements or aspirations.

“Figuring out a way with smaller endowments to provide the financial aid necessary to enroll an economically diverse student body—and to pay for all the other things that you have to pay for at a college—is a very big challenge,” says Rosenberg of Macalester College. “One of the risks that we have to attend to is not becoming the educational equivalent of a BMW.”

If a liberal arts education becomes a luxury, the implications for civil society are profound. A broad-based higher education provides an environment that fosters the critical thinking skills that are the hallmark of informed, responsible citizenship. Disparity in education equals disparity in power. By making a well-rounded education available only to the elite, we move one step closer to a society of two classes: one taught to think and rule and another groomed to follow and obey. ■

BOOKS

Our Coffee, Ourselves

By Richard Greenwald

WHEN BRYANT SIMON'S book, *Everything but the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks* (University of California Press, 2009) arrived in my mail, I thought, great, just what we need: another book by an academic that attempts to understand the world through a simplistic lens, like salt, sushi or coffee. That this genre sells well probably motivated Simon's publisher. But Simon's book is better and more honest than most of the genre in recognizing the limitations of both author and subject. He peeks into the inner life of American culture, but thankfully refrains from offering a unified theory that explains all.

Part history, part ethnography, part marketing theory and part coffee memoir, *Everything but the Coffee* places Starbucks at the center of the hypocrisy of the American middle class. Simon has to stretch a great deal here, as he explores why, for a time, the American middle class saw Starbucks is central to its identity.

Simon shows us how we really live, and it ain't pretty. There was a time, not so long ago, Simon reminds us, that many of us wondered why people would pay so much money for a cup of coffee—even as we were edging closer in line to place our own order. Starbucks, writes Simon, “had little to do with coffee, and everything to do with style, status, identity and aspiration. ... Starbucks delivered more than a stiff shot of caffeine. It pinpointed, packaged, and made easily available, if only through smoke and mirrors, the things that the broad American middle class wanted and thought it needed to make its public and private lives better.” Starbucks fed our emotional needs for status. It became our little “self-gift,” an emotional pick-me-up. It allowed us to feel successful.

It also provided a safe, clean “third space” between home and work, those



Customers sit inside a Starbucks coffee shop in Chicago, Ill.

big chairs and couches becoming our new public sphere. It brought us exotic places and sounds, exposed us to an underground in the safety of a cushy seat: teaching us about places where our coffee came from, and new music and literary voices. It tried to be our cultural guide and helped us feel good about our environmental footprint through its green campaigns and aid to farmers, even if Starbucks did little and we did nothing but buy coffee. It did so consciously, purposefully manipulating our desires, hopes and aspirations, all the while making us feel good about ordering up a venti soy latte.

But, we also knew, on some level, that it was all a delusion we actively participated in. “Starbucks worked as a simulacrum,” Simon writes, “it stamped out the real essence of the original idea of the coffee house and, through proliferation and endless insistence, became itself the real thing for many bobo and creative types.” Even as we believed we were being individuals, demonstrating our sense of style, we were just following the java-man’s master plan. In seeing Starbucks as a third space, as a solution to the environment and globalization, we played into the illusion and lost ground on these fronts.

Simon joins a recent spade of books on the middle class whose authors seem unable to separate themselves from their subject and therefore are compelled to include themselves in the narrative. For

instance, in *Elsewhere, U.S.A.*, sociologist Dalton Conley explores the disruption of space in the modern American middle-class family, combining his research with autobiographical slices of his own family life. From *Everything But the Coffee*, we learn Simon’s coffee habits, haunts and unease with such.

Like much of this literature, there is a confessional quality. We know we should not feel good about our participation in this system, but it is just so much fun. It is as if we who study the topic are involved in a process of self-criticism. This trend makes these books readable, perhaps, but it often dilutes their analytical force. Yet we still know too little about the middle class; with a defined working-class studies and history literature, we know far more about those lower on America’s economic ladder. Is the middle class too big and mystical to fully know? Or is it that most of the authors who write about the middle class are middle-class themselves, and thus uncomfortable with the self-reflection so necessary for thorough criticism?

What Simon and others demonstrate is that we are a culture of hypocrites. We want our coffee and we want to feel good about it: we live in the moment. We know deep inside that buying Starbucks Pike Place does not make us a better person, but part of us feels better hearing that it is sustainable. To more completely understand the middle class would require that we pierce the veil of this hypocrisy. ■

BOOKS

A History of Slander

By Eve Ottenberg

WHEN A MEMBER of the Bush administration leaked to columnist Robert Novak that Valerie Plame was a CIA agent, he was engaging in a time-honored tradition of character assassination (Plame's husband) and the promotion of a patent falsehood (yellowcake uranium) for political ends (the Iraq war). Such tactics have a pedigree that reaches back to 18th-century France and beyond.

In this era of false reports about missing presidential birth certificates, death panels and the supposed socialism/Nazism of mainstream or slightly progressive political figures, Robert Darnton's new cultural history of slander, *The Devil in the Holy Water, or the Art of Slander from Louis XIV to Napoleon* (University of Pennsylvania,

December) is unfortunately relevant.

In *The Devil in the Holy Water*, Darnton, a Harvard professor and director of the Harvard library, explores "how the experience of literature under the Ancien Regime [of France's Bourbon kings] fed into the radical politics of the revolution." With summaries of many famous libels, Darnton's book teems with intrigue, deceit, double-dealing, disguises, blackmail, bribery, extortion and smut.

"For all their venality and disingenuousness, libelers prefigured in some ways the modern investigative reporter," Darnton writes. Indeed, the French Revolution ushered in an era of a free press with a vast multiplication in the number of newspapers. It also brought with it the full flowering of libel literature—the denunciation of someone as a counter-revolutionary. In 18th-century France, such attacks often led to the guillotine. More recently, under Hitler and Stalin, they have led to gas chambers and labor camps.

Darnton writes that like novels "about real people ... libels came to occupy an important sector of the book market by the end of the 17th century." He leads readers through the slums, garrets and "tawdry cafes" of 18th century London and Paris to illuminate how libelers culled news from their sources, mixed fact and fiction and, with no concept of copyright, lifted from each other extensively. Most news traveled by word of mouth. The libelers then patched together anecdotal rumors and bits of gossip into pamphlets, which sold like hotcakes.

These writers were exquisitely personal in the damage they inflicted, though their aims were often political. "The inability of aristocrats to propagate their line provided a libeler with a favorite theme, along with venereal disease transmitted from brothels to the court," Darnton writes. What better symbol of royal rot than sterility and VD?

Permeating Darnton's canvas is the hid-

[art space]



GREEN LIVING, GREEN ART

What will the green home of the future look like? The Milwaukee Art Museum invites the public to interact with forward-looking furniture that is multifunctional and aesthetically innovative. Exhibit curators Ethan Lasser and Hongtao Zhou hope to inspire furniture makers to take a more sustainable approach to design and construction.

Highlights of *Green Furniture Design* include David Raful's chair made of rubber inner tubes and Zhou's own chairs fabricated out of ice and snow (pictured at left). To achieve a low carbon footprint, the curators cut back on paper usage, utilized recycled and local materials, and used bicycles to transport objects from as far away as Green Bay and Madison, Wisc. Live green all winter; the exhibit runs through March 14.

—By Seth Maxon

eous inequality of a class society dominated by arrogant aristocrats, where the ultimate, sneering insult was to refer to a writer as “starving.”

His account of the accomplished libeler Pierre Manuel, who wrote the sensational *Police Unveiled* (1790), reveals the direct route from literary hackdom to the revolution. After interrogation and time in prison as a result of his book, Manuel’s small publishing business was ruined, but he struggled along until the storming of the Bastille. As a former prisoner, he gained access to its archives of interrogations and began publishing them, writing himself “into the front ranks of the revolution’s leadership.” He became the prosecuting attorney of the Commune and an eminence in the Jacobin Club, famous for the opening of his address to Louis XVI: “Sire, I do not like kings...” When the going got very rough in the September massacres of 1792, he courageously rescued the novelist Madame de Staël.

Darnton writes, “Under the Ancien Régime, the Baroness de Staël had enjoyed an existence at the summit of society, where literary prestige and political power converged, while Manuel had barely scraped together a living in the lower ranks of pamphleteers. In September 1792, their positions were reversed.” Manuel cleared a path for her through the carnage by announcing “Public prosecutor of the Commune!” From the Commune, Manuel graduated to the National Convention to establish a constitution and thence, during the Reign of Terror, to the guillotine.

Another infamous libel, *The Devil in the Holy Water* (1783) features a police spy, Inspector Receveur, who is bent on kidnapping French expatriate libelers in London and dragging them back to Paris. It was published by one Marquis de Pelleport, whom Darnton describes as “a thoroughly wicked neêr do well and a very talented writer,” whose oeuvre deploys “irreligion, ribaldry, parody and buffoonery along with protests against oppression and in favor of liberty.” Pelleport was locked up in the Bastille for years, where he composed his novel, *Les Bohémiens*, which Darnton regards as an unsung masterpiece.

excerpt



The *Insecure American: How We Got Here & What We Should Do About It* (University of California, November), edited by Hugh Gusterson and Catherine Besteman, contains an essay by Roger N. Lancaster, an anthropology professor at George Mason University. In “Republic of Fear: The Rise of Punitive Governance in America,” Lancaster explores how the culture of fear undermines American democracy.

The development of an increasingly paranoid, irrational, narcissistic, and authoritarian political culture...no doubt took a great leap forward after the atrocities of September 11, 2001. But post-9/11 policies have only worked materials already at hand, underscoring victimization narratives, feeding obsessions with infantilized innocence, reinforcing trends toward punitive governance, extending the logic of preemption, and otherwise intensifying notable features of what sociologists call “the culture of fear.” ...

It has waxed unimpeded since the late 1970s, when modern crime panics got under way in earnest. Fueled by government cutbacks and inept policing strategies, Reagan-era crack wars fostered the perception that white, middle-class Americans were living in a state of emergency besieged by hardened, incorrigible criminals. ...

The so-called “liberal media” have also played their part. Although crime rates have fallen dramatically since the early 1990s, crime reportage has actually risen in inverse proportion: up to 50 percent of local news airtime is now devoted to crime reportage—prurient stories about sex abuse, lurid tales of gang violence, breathless accounts of callous predation. While the news media have profited off sensational coverage of this overblown crime beat, right-wing political interests have manipulated it, stoking fear

of crime and predation to win elections—and, more enduringly, to reshape the social contract. This new social contract involves ever more “sticks” and ever fewer “carrots.” Our current zeal for punishment turns on the perpetual cultivation of outsized fears.

This self-perpetuating culture of fear provides the crucial nexus between punitive governance at home and irrational imperial adventures abroad. America’s most intolerable acts—whether dealing with black urban menace, brown border incursions, or far-flung Islamic peril—invariably take shape within a life-world dominated by fear.



Pelleport may have had a malicious tongue, but he showed great courage during the revolution, attempting to save the one official who had shown him kindness in the Bastille. Darnton writes, “Already half dead, [the official] said to [Pelleport] ‘What are you doing, young man? You will only sacrifice yourself without saving me.’ But Pelleport ... called out again for the rioters to disperse. They ... stabbed him with bayonets... But Pelleport lived to tell the

tale, and Manuel published it as a testimony to the courage of a man who once had lived from libels.”

Today, reporters and pundits who mix fact and fiction (whether with regard to the Iraq war, or the escalating war in Afghanistan) might find Pelleport’s courage—and transformation as a writer—instructive; even if they don’t stand up to an angry mob, they might stand up to their anonymous sources in officialdom with an occasional daring question. ■

Matthew Hoh

Continued from back page

aid programs to both the new Kabul plutocracy and the multi-layered Taliban—that the morass makes every other issue of policy moot.

The 36-year-old diplomat brings unique authority to public debate. As an insider confirming outside critics, he dispels the myth that classified information redeems a failed policy. He also speaks to and for many in government, infusing honesty where folly feeds on wary quiet and fraudulent unanimity.

“There are a lot of guys, not just in the Foreign Service but in the military, who are looking at this thing and they don’t understand what we are doing there,” Hoh told one audience. “I get mail all the time from junior and mid-level officers telling me, ‘Keep it up. This makes no sense to us.’”

Whatever this protest says outwardly, its deeper meaning is devastating. The sheer contrast between Hoh and senior officials—seeing the same reality, the same reports—exposes some dirty little secrets of policy haunting the Obama presidency.

With the eight-year enormity of waste, venality and oppression since the invasion in 2001 (ravages Hoh saw climaxed around him) went the knowing silence—if not collusion—of a succession of U.S. diplomats and officers responsible for the defiled occupation of Afghanistan. There is a troubling legacy, too, in the policy process. Drawing on military experiences irrelevant to Afghanistan, a generation of U.S. commanders comes with a crudely recycled but promotion-rich creed of counter-insurgency, avenging what some as young officers in the 1970s saw as a false defeat, if not home-front betrayal, in Vietnam. They are allied with the lucrative in-and-out careerism of powerful—if publicly faceless—civilian Pentagon officials, what State Department rivals call the “COIN-heads” of counter-insurgency



Matthew Hoh

The sheer contrast between Hoh and senior officials—seeing the same reality—exposes some dirty little secrets of policy haunting the Obama presidency.

dogma. Those currents run like a murky subterranean river beneath the doomed policy Hoh silhouettes.

Most telling may be the disparity between Hoh—the serious student of Afghan culture—and Washington’s decision-makers. To deal with one of the most complex settings on earth, the Obama administration relies on key figures—Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Af-Pak Special envoy Richard Holbrooke and NSC Advisor James Jones—whose careers in politics or the bureaucracy (like those commanding generals David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal) are bereft of any substantive knowledge of a people they are supposed to master. It leaves them all dangerously dependent on staff, and prey to the absence of dissenters like Hoh among aides whose credentials are hardly more impressive than their own.

That intellectual vacuum, a mirror of Vietnam decision-making, explains the shock and hostility that greeted recent

cables of U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry opposing the deployment of additional U.S. troops backing an irredeemable regime. As Hoh exemplifies, actual knowledge of Afghanistan is rare—and the lack scarcely recognized—in a war council prone to flippant lines like Clinton’s recent “There are warlords and there are warlords,” or Holbrooke’s definition of success, “We’ll know it when we see it.”

At the heart of Washington’s decision-making dysfunction, of course, is always a president in thrall to the hoary fears and myths of national security, the most important realm he governs. It is a realm for which most presidents are least prepared. For Barack Obama, only historic courage and insight can surmount the multiple corruptions of policy he is heir to.

Hoh embodies that bravery. Implored by Eikenberry to stay, he chose to forgo a prized career to speak

out. We know that agony. There is no easy course ahead in Afghanistan. U.S. policies a half-century before 2001 account for much of the politics now so deplored in Kabul, a breakdown inflicted as well as inherent, and a blood debt added to the toll of occupation and war.

The gruesome truth of that history is that our sacrifices so far have been largely in vain. It is Matthew Hoh’s heroism to try to stop the inseparable casualties of lives and truth. ■

ROGER MORRIS AND GEORGE KENNEY
are both Foreign Service Officers who resigned on principle. Morris left the State Department after the 1970 invasion of Cambodia. Kenney left in 1991 over policy in the Balkans. Both writers are award-winning authors. Morris’s Between the Graves: America, Afghanistan and the Politics of Intervention, will be published by Knopf in 2010. Kenney produces and hosts a podcast at ElectricPolitics.com and serves on the In These Times Board of Editors. A version of this article appeared on the Huffington Post.



A DIPLOMATIC CASUALTY OF WAR

Matthew Hoh's warning to Obama goes unheeded in Afghanistan

BY ROGER MORRIS AND GEORGE KENNEY

THE RARE RESIGNATION ON principle is always telling in American government. When Matthew Hoh left the State Department in October—a Marine Captain in Iraq who became a diplomat in Afghanistan early this year—his act was significant far beyond the first reports.

Hoh speaks grim truth to power. His message is that to pursue the Afghan war policy in any guise—including President Obama's prescription of 30,000 additional, rapidly deployed troops—will be utter folly, trapping America in an unwinnable civil war in the Hindu Kush, and only fueling terrorism.

An advisor in southern Afghanistan, Hoh knew the malignancy of war behind the war. Eight years after the U.S. inva-

sion and a third of a trillion dollars spent, half the nation faces starvation on 45 cents a day, half the children die before five, and half the surviving young have no schools, part of a torment Afghans plead in poll after poll to be understood as the core of their conflict. He knew well the source of that scourge in the U.S.-installed Kabul regime, a kleptocracy of war- and drug-lords holed up amid American bodyguards in "poppy palaces," while clan-based "security forces" loot the countryside, sodomize its sons and swell insurgent ranks.

"We're propping up a government," Hoh said last week, "that isn't worth dying for." So pervasive and profound is that corruption, so entwined with the private exploitation and official graft of the U.S. occupation regime—including kickbacks or extortion payments from both the American military and civilian

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